My Big Sister Lives in a Fantasy World

2

THE HALF-BAKED VAMPIRE VS. THE STRONGEST LITTLE SISTER?!

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Illust. An2A

Big Sister
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LIVES IN A
FANTASY WORLD
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Chapter 1: A Chinese Restaurant Basically Named Konnichiwa Nihon
Shing!
Something came flying
out of Mutsuko's elbow.
"Oh, sorry! It's just a prototype.
I think the stopper came loose again!"
Mutsuko said, casually as could be.
Yuichi's face went pale.
"You could have killed me!
If I'd been anyone else, I would
definitely be dead right now!"

HEY, ISN'T IT A LITTLE ODD FOR A BROTHER AND SISTER TO WALK ARM IN ARM?
I BELIEVE I TOLD YOU NOT TO MEDDLE UNNECES-SARILY IN OUR BUSINESS, DIDN'T I?
"YOU TWO SEEM TO BE GETTING ALONG, HUH?"
Aiko Noro
Yuichi's classmate. She seems normal at a glance, but she's actually a vampire. Her big brother has middle school syndrome.
Yoriko Sakaki
Yuichi's little sister, in her second year in middle school. She loves her big brother to an absurd degree.
Yuichi Sakaki
The story's protagonist, in his first year in high school. His big sister has middle school syndrome, and has forced him to learn all kinds of weird fighting styles.

Chapter 7: World Domination Starts at Seishin High!

Aiko twisted her body, and
gazed seriously into Yuichi's eyes.
"Mom told me that I have the power
to protect the people I care about."
Yuichi had a bad feeling
about where this was going.
Aiko smiled, and with great
trepidation, returned Yuichi's
embrace. Yuichi couldn't move.
"I'm sorry."
She pressed her face to his neck.

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Prologue: Natsuki Takeuchi is Definitely Crazy

“Would you go out with me?” Takashi Jonouchi asked, without a hint of nervousness in his voice. He was confident that he would not be refused.

They were standing behind the gym at Prefectural Seishin High School. It was the most common place for students to ask other students out, and Takashi saw no reason to deviate from this practice. He didn’t need an ostentatious display to get attention. “By the book” would work well enough for him.

He had everything a girl could possibly want: good looks, good grades, and fabulous wealth. Of course, one girl had rejected his advances previously, but he had taken that as a learning experience, and studied diligently since then.

“I’m sorry... Could I ask you one little question?” the girl asked.

Takashi’s initial shock that he had been turned down flat became relief as she continued.

The name of the girl, standing there with head cocked in puzzlement, was Natsuki Takeuchi. She was famous as one of the most beautiful girls in the first-year class.

She wasn’t just “cute” like most high school girls. She was genuinely beautiful, with an air of maturity that was lacking in most girls of her age. She had short-cropped hair and cold eyes, and never flirted, which could easily lead one to believe that she was arrogant about her appearance.

“Sure, what do you want to ask?”

“Who are you?”

She doesn’t even know who I am?! Takashi thought, so forcefully that he only barely managed to keep himself from saying it out loud.

In the interest of surprising her, he had sent her an invitation to meet him without using his name. Perhaps he had merely been arrogant.

“R-Right. Forgive me, I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Takashi

Jonouchi."

He restrained himself from appending, "You really don't know who I am?" Even he knew that that would sound pompous.

"Okay, Jonouchi. So? Where, concretely, am I supposed to go with you? As I've never met you before, I have no idea what this might be regarding."

Takashi was dumbstruck. Did she really not know what he meant by "go out with me"? That was the kind of silly misunderstanding that happened in manga, not real life.

Maybe she's feeling shy and trying to deflect the subject? No... probably not...

Natsuki's expression suggested total sincerity.

"What I meant was, I want you to be my girlfriend. What do you think?" he asked, trying to take her in good faith.

"By girlfriend, you mean, you want a romantic relationship? I've never been in one of those, so I'm uncertain as to what exactly it entails. I have some ideas of what a girlfriend does, but they might not line up with your own, so could I ask for more detail about what it is that you expect? I can't exactly give a proper answer to something I don't fully understand."

Is she making fun of me? Takashi was starting to think she was more trouble than she was worth, but he didn't want to give up on her quite that easily.

"Well... we'd call each other, we'd email each other... we'd go on dates..." Takashi stammered as he tried to explain. He had vague ideas about what girlfriends did, but he was finding it was hard to put that into precise words.

"Dates... that means going out into town and eating things together, right? And you call and email each other, too... and that's fun?"

Is she suggesting that she doesn't find that fun? Takashi thought, starting to feel paranoid.

"Of course," he continued, smoothly. "Any man would be happy to spend time with a beautiful girl like you." He decided this might be a good place for some flattery. One of Takashi's core beliefs was that Japanese men were not good at complimenting women. The ability to do this effortlessly, then, was an important

skill.

“So if I become your girlfriend, we’ll go out together, eat food, and call and email each other... and that’s all I have to do?”

“Yes, that’s right. You’re just asking to make sure we’re on the same page, right?”

“Yes. I think it’s very important. Becoming a girlfriend is like forging a contract, so it’s important to get everything clear before you agree to it. The image I associate with a romantic relationship is physical contact, but are you saying you don’t require that?”

“W-Well...” Takeshi stammered again.

Of course, that *was* Takashi’s ultimate objective, and the dating was just a way to get there, but you couldn’t just admit to that from the start. You had to go down a lot of annoying side roads to get the girl in the mood.

“Shall I assume that you don’t want to have sex with me?”

Her casual use of the word caused Takashi to freeze up at first, but it faded after a moment. Perhaps this was for the best. If they were both interested in the same thing, why fight it?

“No, I do want to have sex with you.”

It was then that Natsuki smiled at him for the first time. “I’m so sorry. I don’t want to have sex with you.”

“Huh?” Takashi asked, confused. That was not the response he was expecting.

The next moment, her beautifully proportioned face drew in close to his. They seemed about to collide, but the next minute, her face was gone, and he felt her behind him.

Her breath tickled the back of his neck and the faint, feminine aroma caused his heart to race.

“See... You just smell awful to me... Did you know that people prefer the smell of members of the opposite sex who have immune systems different from theirs on a genetic level? Which means our immune systems may be similar... I’ve heard the instinct is there to prevent incest, but I don’t know if it’s true.”

She was so close to him... This could be his chance. He could turn around and continue his confession. He could embrace her and whisper words of love...

But he did nothing but stand there.

“Huh? Isn’t that Takeuchi?”

“Sakaki, don’t look! At times like these, the polite thing to do is to pretend you don’t see!”

The nearby sound of a young man and woman’s voices snapped Takashi back to reality — how long had he been standing there? — as they came around the corner of the gym. Judging from their uniforms, they were students of Seishin High School, just like Takashi.

Natsuki must have known them, because she swiftly began walking in their direction. All Takashi could do was watch in astonishment.

“Well, I should be going,” she said. “That’s right, I forgot to give you a proper answer. Sorry, but I can’t go out with you.”

Natsuki didn’t even turn back. It was as though she had no interest at all.

Takashi could do nothing but stare after her in a daze as she left.

Then she latched on to the approaching boy.

“Whoa, where did that come from? Get off me!”

“H-Hey, Takeuchi! What are you doing?”

“Yes, you smell so much better, Sakaki!” Natsuki buried her face in the boy’s neck.

All of the coldness in her voice had vanished, and she sounded like any ordinary girl her age.

Sakaki...

Up until that point, this had all been acceptable. All he had been doing was trying to make a move on a beautiful girl, and she had turned him down. That should have been the end of it. But not now. He couldn’t simply give up now.

What the hell is going on?

Jealousy welled up in Takashi's heart despite his attempts to suppress it.

You've gotta be kidding! Who do you think you are? He began to step forward, threateningly... then stopped dumb again as he recognized the other girl who was with him.

"Takeuchi! It's one thing to turn a boy down, but at least try to show a little consideration..."

Isn't that... Aiko Noro?

Takashi's mind immediately went blank. An unpleasant sweat was forming on his forehead.

Aiko Noro was the only other girl who had ever rejected him. The only two women who had ever blown him off were both getting friendly with one other man.

And how did Takashi fit into this diagram?

"Dammit!" he shrieked as he went running off. This sort of humiliation was far beyond his ability to deal with.

Chapter 1: A Chinese Restaurant Basically Named Konnichiwa Nihon

There was a crash.

Yuichi fell back on his bed, clutching his forehead. He seemed to have collided with something when he sat up.

He heard a little shriek, looked beside him, and saw a girl in a sailor uniform lying there. She was also rubbing her forehead. She must have been leaning over the bottom bunk of their bunk beds.

“That hurt...” the girl said as she looked up, still rubbing her forehead. The label “Little Sister” was hanging over her head.

Yoriko Sakaki, Yuichi’s little sister, was in her second year of middle school. She was a rather mature girl for her age, with long, black hair that suited her well. She was well-known as the younger of the Beautiful Sakaki Sisters.

“What happened, Yori?” he asked.

It was clear that they had bumped into each other as he sat up in bed, but he couldn’t figure out what she had been doing there in the first place.

“Huh? Hmm? Nothing!”

“It was definitely not nothing! Why were you standing over my bed?”

“Um... a nostril hair! I saw you had a nostril hair sticking out, and leaned in to check...”

“Oh, really?” Yoriko sounded flustered in her response, but Yuichi saw no reason to doubt the idea.

“You need to be more careful about your appearance! You’ll never get a girlfriend at this rate,” Yoriko scolded as she rolled away from him.

Yuichi checked his watch. It was 7 AM on Thursday.

“Do you only have morning classes today too, Yori?” he asked. At Seishin High

School, where Yuichi attended, they were having final exams for their first term. Today was the last day of the tests.

“Yeah, why? Ah! You want to go somewhere in the afternoon?” Yoriko asked, brightening.

“Probably not. I agreed to get lunch with the club.” They had decided to get lunch together to celebrate the end of exams.

“I see...” Yoriko’s mood immediately seemed to sour. She must have really gotten her hopes up.

“Well, today’s not good, but I was thinking of buying some clothes soon. Would you help me pick some out?” Needled by feelings of guilt, Yuichi spoke right up.

“Sure, I can do that!” Yoriko smiled again.

Yuichi hardly ever picked out his own clothes. As a child, he had just worn what his parents had picked out, and once he got old enough to pick out his own, he’d opted to leave that to Yoriko.

His older sister Mutsuko had tried picking out clothes for him, too, but they tended to be bizarre, so he ended up relying more on Yoriko.

“Now that tests are over, summer break’s right around the corner...” announced the teacher. Maybe he’d be able to take it easy for a while. It had been three months since Yuichi Sakaki had first entered Seishin High School.

“Yeah, so, today’s the last day of finals. Can you guess what I’m going to say next?” Yuichi was sitting in his classroom, staring out into space, when Hanako Nodayama — who had the label “Homeroom Teacher” hovering over her head — arrived and spoke up lazily from the lectern.

As usual, she was in a track suit, with her hair done up in a half-hearted style. Everything about her suggested a total lack of enthusiasm.

“Don’t make trouble, right?” The student who raised his hand to answer her was Shota Saeki, who sat in the seat in front of Yuichi.

His label was “Ace Striker,” and he was a member of the soccer club. Despite

being a first-year, he was apparently already a regular — a big guy with an uncomplicated personality.

“Yes! That’s right! I know a lot of you are gonna want to let your hair down now that tests are over, but when thinking about whether or not to do something, consider whether or not it’ll make trouble for me! That is all!” As always, their homeroom teacher was completely self-centered. The moment her job was over, she dashed out of the classroom.

The students of Class 1-C were not surprised in the least. They were used to this by now.

Only a few students left right after Hanako did. Most remained behind in the classroom to talk. Now that they were finished with their tests, their thoughts were already flying ahead two weeks, to summer vacation. The only major event before the term ending ceremony would be the return of their tests.

As always, copious labels hung in Yuichi’s line of sight.

The magic sight: Soul Reader. It was Yuichi’s power, so named by his big sister, Mutsuko.

Yuichi could see words above people’s heads that seemed to reveal something about that person.

Their contents covered a wide range, from unremarkable labels like “Mom” and “Big Sister” to dangerous-sounding ones like “Serial Killer,” “Vampire,” “Witch,” and “Zombie.”

He had no idea what had awakened the power; he had just had it when he’d gotten up in the morning of his last day of spring vacation.

It had gotten Yuichi into a little trouble on his first day of school, as well. That trouble had worked itself out, but his lesson from the experience was to give a wide berth to the classmates with strange labels.

He came off a little standoffish as a result, but it had helped him get through his first term in peace. At this rate, he might finish up without any more trouble.

Yuichi looked around the classroom.

“Heir” Kogan Yanagisawa was chatting with “Superhuman” Miyu Hirata, while

“Adult Datesim Childhood Friend” Sayaka Haraguchi poked in her head for a chat with “Datesim Childhood Friend” Yoko Sugimoto.

“Anthromorph” Yuri Konishi was giving a lecture to “Datesim Protagonist” Koichi Makise, “Zombie” Risa Ayanokoji, “High School Tragedy Victim” Riko Seki, and “High School Detective” Sadao Shindo about the importance of review and how they mustn’t let their guard down now that the tests were over.

“Witch” An Katagiri was chatting with “Witch’s Beloved,” Takuro Oda, about something. Takuro seemed more or less used to An’s behavior by now, so he wasn’t nearly as frightened as he had been at the start. Talking to Takuro seemed to be the only time when An’s expression relaxed, too. At times like these, she almost seemed kind of cute.

But just as that thought entered his mind, An suddenly tossed her hair back and glared over at him.

This is why you terrify me! Any time Yuichi looked at An, she always looked back at him. It was as if she could sense his gaze upon her.

Yuichi averted his sight from An to make eye contact with Shota in the seat in front of him. He had been talking to “High School Criminal” Saito, but that seemed to be over now.

“High School Criminal” was another disturbing label, but he didn’t seem to be doing anything suspicious, so there was no reason to worry about him just yet.

“Right? Hanako hasn’t cut her hair since the first day, see?” Shota said in his usual lackadaisical way.

Now that he mentioned it, it did seem rather long. There was more black at the roots, too, indicating a neglected dye job.

“You know what she’s like. She probably thinks it’s too much trouble,” Yuichi responded.

“Right, but then why’d she dye it in the first place? Why dye it at all if it’s too much trouble to take care of it?”

“True.” But it was pointless to try to figure it out. He didn’t care about the color of his homeroom teacher’s hair, anyway.

Shota seemed to notice Yuichi's lack of interest, and changed the subject. "What are you doing for summer vacation?"

Summer vacation was still a few weeks away, but with tests finished, it felt imminent.

"No particular plans. I'll probably just hang around the house. What about you, Saeki?"

"Clubs, mostly. We've got our summer training camp, but that'll suck with no girls along. By the way, your club is all girls, right, Sakaki?" Yuichi grimaced. He didn't like the implication that he had joined it to get girls.

"If you're jealous, why don't you join?" he offered.

The survival club was a club led by Yuichi's big sister, Mutsuko. She claimed it was about figuring out ways to survive in the world, but they didn't just prepare for sudden earthquakes and other disasters. They also discussed alien invasions, or what to do if you were thrown into an isekai — another world or time period.

And, just as Shota said, other than Yuichi, all the other people on the roll were beautiful girls. You'd expect a club like that have guys beating down the door to join, but they hadn't gained any new members since April.

"Well... I dunno..." Shota said, hesitantly. He knew Mutsuko's reputation by now, and he wasn't the only one. The main obstacle to getting new members for the club was its president.

Mutsuko Sakaki: a striking girl whose outward beauty masked a truly unfortunate personality. She was known throughout the school for her "middle school syndrome," a sort of delusional pretentiousness associated with middle schoolers. But Yuichi knew that hers was a little different from what most people thought of when they heard the term.

Her middle school delusions related only to things that were achievable in the real world. She had imbued Yuichi with seemingly impossible, ridiculous martial arts techniques that she had read about in manga, and stuffed his bag with bizarre tools — all of which Yuichi found incredibly embarrassing.

But it did have a few upsides. He'd probably do very well on those final exams, for instance, thanks to her attempts to train his memory, which allowed him to

memorize a considerable amount of information.

But since it all came from last-minute cramming, he'd probably forget most of it by the time the testing period was over. He knew better than to think he was especially smart.

While Yuichi reminisced about his big sister, Shota hurried out of the classroom, and "Love Interest" Aiko Noro approached him in his place.

Her label had originally been "Vampire," but at some point it had changed to "Love Interest" and remained that way ever since.

She was pale and petite, with an attractive face framed by a short bob haircut. Her grandfather was from France, so she was only three-quarters Japanese, which gave her a slightly exotic air.

"Sakaki! Let's get going!" she said to him, cheerfully, as Natsuki Takeuchi — "Love Interest II" — came up behind her. Apparently they all wanted to go together. Like Yuichi, Aiko and Natsuki were in the survival club.

Natsuki had short-cropped hair and cool, almond eyes, and was often described as one of the most beautiful girls in the first-year class.

Like Aiko's, her label had not always been "Love Interest"; it had originally been the terrifying "Serial Killer."

Yuichi felt a little self-conscious about this, but he couldn't figure out what had caused the change, and if it referred to the girls being his own love interest, or someone else's. The labels weren't terribly forthcoming.

"That guy... he asked you out, right?" Aiko asked nervously to Natsuki as they made their way out of the school building, referring to something that had happened a week ago. That had been just before finals started, and she had probably been so busy with studying that she was only remembering it now.

One might expect them to talk a little more easily with each other, being classmates and all, but things were probably still a little awkward after the whole kidnapping incident.

"Did he? I don't remember anymore. He wasn't all that interesting." To Natsuki, whether someone was interesting or not referred to whether or not

they were worth killing.

“Would you kill him if he was?” Yuichi asked, dubiously. She said she had reformed, but he still didn’t fully trust her.

The three of them were heading for the school’s rear gate, on the side with the athletic fields.

“Of course not. I would never do something like that on school grounds.”

“But you would do it if you weren’t on school grounds?”

“Not anymore. Not as long as you’re keeping me satisfied. Right, Sakaki?” she asked with a lascivious grin.

“I keep telling you to stop referring to it that way...” Aiko muttered.

As a serial killer, Natsuki Takeuchi felt the urge to kill the way most people felt hunger. But unlike most others of her kind, it seemed, she had a desire to go to school like normal people did. She said she was working hard to fit in with society as a whole.

Even so, she couldn’t fully fight her serial killer urges, so she was currently using Yuichi to keep them at bay by joining in with his training every now and then.

“Can’t you do something about that hobby of yours?”

“Hobby? What an awful way to put it. I think of myself as a girl of deep passions. Trying to kill each other is the richest form of communication there is.”

“Um... that makes no sense, you know,” Aiko said.

Yuichi didn’t really understand it, either.

“When you’re trying to kill someone, you’re watching them, analyzing them, striving to understand them on the deepest levels. Just by facing them, you have to sample what they’re throwing out, grasp it, and infer. If that’s not communication, what is it?”

“I’m not trying to kill you, though. But I guess it is important to analyze your opponent in combat...”

“Which is very upsetting. It means you don’t love me, Sakaki. If you did, you’d

get serious with me.”

“L-Love...” Aiko was speechless.

“She’s joking, obviously,” Yuichi said, refusing to play along. Even if it wasn’t a joke, she was probably still planning something.

“It didn’t sound like a joke to me...” Aiko murmured, unconvinced.

“By the way, how’s he doing? The subordinate of yours... doesn’t he follow you out of love?” Yuichi asked, remembering the big man who had appeared after the fight, only to fall to Mutsuko’s bomb and stun gun.

“Sakiyama, you mean?”

“I guess, if that’s his name.”

“Sakiyama is so weak, it’s out of the question. I just let him in my house because he’s useful.”

“Your house... You mean, he lives with you?” Aiko asked, looking surprised.

Yuichi was a little surprised, too. He didn’t think they had that kind of relationship.

“It’s convenient to have an adult around.”

“Just what is he? Is he human?”

“I suppose? He started out as a stalker. Look, over there,” Natsuki said as their walk brought them closer to the gate.

She was pointing to the top half of a man’s head peeking out from behind the gate. He couldn’t fully hide himself, but he was trying hard to be inconspicuous. Even Yuichi hadn’t noticed him until he was pointed out.

Yuichi glanced at his label, which was now “Stalker.” Previously it had been “Serial Killer’s Lackey.”

“Ugh... I didn’t even notice,” Aiko muttered in fear.

“Yeah, since it’s not something you’d be expecting to see...” He hadn’t noticed the man during his fight with Natsuki, either. Perhaps “Stalker” also referred to a special ability of his.

“Stalkers you can’t even detect are the worst,” Yuichi murmured, but Natsuki didn’t seem to feel like explaining any more. They moved past Sakiyama and continued on their way.

After they got out of the back gate, Yuichi looked around. He had never been on this side of the school before, and he found it felt a bit lonely compared to the front.

Their destination was a restaurant just outside the gate.

Its name: Nihao the China.

Yuichi looked around the narrow shop as they opened the poorly fitted doors and walked in.

As the name would suggest, it was a Chinese restaurant. The distinct aroma of spice filling the air suggested a specialization in Szechuan food — the kind of place that sold lunch sets at reasonable prices.

Two girls in Seishin High School uniforms were seated at the restaurant’s one round table.

“Yu! Over here!” Mutsuko Sakaki waved to them exaggeratedly as they arrived.

“You don’t have to shout. We can see you,” Yuichi said tiredly.

Above her head was the label “Big Sister,” which, fortunately, needed no elaboration. She was a second-year student and the president of the survival club that Yuichi and the girls were part of.

Most people agreed that she was beautiful, but the knife-like barrettes she wore in her long hair gave her a rather menacing air.

Unlike the girl sitting beside her, she wore the short-sleeved summer uniform over a long-sleeved shirt. She did that to prevent exposing her skin.

It was an unsuitable mode of dress for the hot season, but Yuichi had no place to talk, as (albeit at her urging) he was wearing a long-sleeved shirt.

Even one layer of cloth was better than bare skin, and, she had insisted, it could mean the difference between life and death.

“What’s with this restaurant? If it served Japanese food, would it be

Konnichiwa Nihon?” As he spoke, Yuichi took a seat across from Mutsuko and her friend. Aiko and Natsuki sat down on either side of him.

“Speaking of which, I know of an Indian food shop called Namaste!” Mutsuko offered, to the interest of no one.

“I chose it because I liked the name!” she continued. “It sounds like one of the Magnificent Ten! ‘Just leave this to Nihao the China!’”

“That’s ridiculous...” Yuichi said, collapsing over the table.

“Noro, did you read the latest chapter?” the girl beside Mutsuko asked, turning to Aiko. She was the club’s vice president, Kanako Orihara. Above her head was the label “Isekai Fanatic.”

She had a docile air about her, wavy chestnut hair, and a chest that was considerably larger than Mutsuko’s.

She longed to visit an isekai — an alternate world or time period — and had spent a lot of time thinking about what she’d do if she ever traveled to one, which may have been the origin of her friendship with Mutsuko.

All of her ideas about isekai had even led her to write a novel set in one, called *My Demon Lord Is Too Cute to Kill and Now the World Is in Danger!*, which she had put up on a fiction sharing site on the internet to get feedback, though Yuichi hadn’t read it yet.

“The Colossus died... What’s the demon king going to do now?” Aiko asked, mournfully.

The last time they’d discussed it, Yuichi recalled, the Colossus had been kicking around the hero’s army. The third-hand scraps of knowledge he was acquiring about it made it difficult for him to piece together exactly what the story was about.

“Oh, but there’s foreshadowing that the Colossus could be revived!” Mutsuko interrupted, forcefully.

“Sakaki! Even if you guessed it, don’t tell!” Kanako glared at Mutsuko.

“Oh, sorry! I just can’t stop myself from talking about stuff like this!”

Indeed, Mutsuko had always been that way. She was the type to immediately

start talking the minute she noticed some foreshadowing, or figured out the twist in a movie.

“Noro, I started another novel called *Dark Swordsman Alice in the Labyrinth of the Dead*! Won’t you read it? I’m trying out a different atmosphere from *Demon King*!”

“Ah, I can’t wait,” Aiko answered with a grin. At first she’d seemed annoyed by the pressure to read the novel, because she wasn’t used to reading. But now that she’d started it, she said, she found it very interesting. She had become quite a fan of Kanako’s writing.

Aiko poured out three cups of water and set one in front of each of them. The water pitcher, left out in the middle of the table, appeared to be self-service.

“Does this restaurant have anything good?” Yuichi asked as he took a drink of his water and sighed.

“I put in a random order! Is there anything you didn’t want?” Mutsuko spread out her hands and gestured as though a three-day feast were spread out before them. She really did make a big production out of everything.

“You should have asked that before you ordered!”

“Um... I’m not great with garlic...” Aiko held up a hand timidly.

“Really? Well, I ordered a lot, so just eat whatever doesn’t have it! But wow, you don’t like garlic? You must be a vampire!”

“Lots of people don’t like garlic,” Yuichi said, feeling a chill run up his spine. Aiko Noro was still hiding her vampiric nature from her fellow club members.

“Hey, does eating garlic hurt you at all?” Yuichi whispered to her.

“Oh? No, I just don’t like the smell,” Aiko responded, a little stunned.

“That was really misleading!”

“What’s wrong, Yuichi?” Kanako asked, her usually quiet voice seeming louder than usual.

“Oh, nothing,” Yuichi dissembled as a waitress in a cheongsam came by with the food.

“Hey, it’s not that big a restaurant. Why is she wearing a cheongsam?” Aiko asked in confusion.

“I don’t know. Probably because she likes it.”

Or because the owner likes it, Yuichi thought, casting a glance at the kitchen, where a man who appeared to be the head chef stood over a wok.

He had a shaved head with a lone pigtail, above which was the label “Nihao the China.” In terms of being ostentatiously pseudo-Chinese, he far outstripped the waitress.

Yuichi was starting to realize why this restaurant wasn’t popular. You didn’t need Soul Reader to find it all very suspicious.

“Yes, yes! I like it, yes!”

“‘Yes’?” Aiko’s eyes widened at the waitress’s odd phrasing.

“Wow! I can’t believe we met a real Chinese person with a quaint speech quirk here!” Mutsuko cried out happily.

“I’m not Chinese, yes! I’m full-blooded Japanese, yes!” Indeed, she had none of the usual Chinese accent. She was just appending “yes” to the end of every sentence.

“Hey, why do you do that? Oh! Are you a Sexy Peking fan?” Mutsuko burst out.

Sexy Peking was a comedy magician, and one of Mutsuko’s many idols, who used the same speech tic.

“It’s got nothing to do with Sexy Peking. It just seems appropriate to a Chinese restaurant... yes?” The waitress seemed slightly embarrassed about having her speech tic pointed out. The label “Fake” hung above her head.

FAKE

“Hamasaki?” Yuichi asked, remembering the label. He had previously seen it above the head of his classmate, Tomomi Hamasaki.

She wasn’t wearing her usual glasses, and with her hair done up in buns and dressed in a cheongsam, she almost seemed like a different person. He wouldn’t have recognized her if not for Soul Reader.

“Tomo? This is the Chinese restaurant where you work?” Aiko spoke up in surprise as she realized the connection.

“Oh, er... well... I didn’t think you’d catch on that quickly... yes.” It was true that her current getup basically served as a disguise.

Yuichi was regretting calling her out. Since the label above her head read “Fake,” it probably wasn’t something he should poke his nose into.

“Look, no one cares about the event cutscene where you run into your classmate working at the Chinese restaurant we just happen to have chosen. Let’s set that aside and get right to the subject at hand: what to do over summer vacation!” Mutsuko said. Upon learning that Tomomi was both full-blooded Japanese and not a Sexy Peking fan, she had swiftly switched the subject back to club activities.

“Um, I know I was disguised so you wouldn’t recognize me, but saying no one cares is a little harsh... yes?” Tomomi murmured as she retreated to a corner of the store.

They were the only customers present, so she didn’t have much to do until the next round of food was ready.

“It’s summer vacation, so we need to hold a training camp, right?” Mutsuko said gleefully. Yuichi was a little surprised. He hadn’t thought their club was that serious. Usually they just sat around the club room talking about whatever came to mind.

“A training camp? That sounds great! It’s gotta be at the beach, right?” Aiko said, excited.

Yuichi scowled as he flashed back to a memory of being stuffed into armor and thrown into the ocean. Thanks to that, he had learned the utterly useless skill of

how to swim in a full suit of armor. “Can we not do the beach?”

“The mountains, then?”

Aiko’s innocent suggestion forced Yuichi into another flashback. The mountains were dangerous.

Mutsuko would throw him off of cliffs to increase his toughness, force him to fight monkeys and cows and bears, shave off one of his eyebrows so he couldn’t just run home, and train him in taking attacks from behind.

Mutsuko was the practical type, so her training wasn’t without purpose. But sometimes she’d force a ridiculous regimen on him based purely on something she’d read about in manga.

“I think it would be nicer to just stay at home and take it easy. If we have to do something, couldn’t we do it at school? Wouldn’t it be hard to get permission to take a trip somewhere?”

“Permission?” Mutsuko asked in confusion.

“Did you not realize you needed permission?”

“What’s the big deal? Maybe they’d raise a stink if we did it as an official club activity, but the school can’t object if we’re just going out to have fun as friends!”

“Now we’re just having fun? So what about the training camp?” The official line on club trips was that they weren’t supposed to be about having fun.

“Aw, what’s wrong with that? Anyway, anywhere we go together will be fun!” She sounded a little dejected at first, but then pepped up as she found a new way to phrase it.

Yuichi finally gave up. Nothing he said was going to stop this. “I don’t want to go... but what’s up with you guys anyway? Don’t you have lots of plans for summer vacation?”

“I don’t have any real plans, myself,” Aiko responded.

“Neither do I,” Natsuki followed up.

“It would be boring to stay home alone all summer,” Kanako agreed.

“I assumed girls in high school would have a little more planned for summer vacation...” he murmured.

It was about this point in the conversation that the rest of the food came out.

“Think about where you want to go and what you want to do for training camp by the beginning of the next club meeting, okay? For now, let’s eat!” Mutsuko began taking a bit from each plate.

Yuichi set his eye on the spicy-looking mapo tofu and gave it a try. It was as spicy as it looked, but definitely tasty. The restaurant’s lack of popularity was definitely not because of the food.

After eating his fill, Yuichi stood up.

“What’s wrong?” Aiko asked.

“Gotta hit the john. Hey, Hamasaki, where’s the bathroom?”

“Huh? Oh, it’s in the back.”

Yuichi headed for the back, wondering idly where her speech tic had gone.

But just as he was passing by Mutsuko, he was suddenly forced to jump straight into the air.

Shing! Something came flying out of Mutsuko’s elbow.

“Oh, sorry! It’s just a prototype. I think the stopper came loose again!” Mutsuko said, as casually as could be.

Yuichi’s face went pale. “You could have killed me! If I’d been anyone else, I would definitely be dead right now!”

“No way. You’d easily survive a hit from that!”

A sharp blade had ripped through Mutsuko’s sleeve. Its cold glint, extending from her wrist to just before her shoulder, definitely looked lethal. If Yuichi hadn’t jumped away, it would have sliced him right through the side.

“Wh-What is that...?” Aiko asked, gazing at the blade in shock.

“I fashioned it after the Harden Saber!” She was referring to a move used by a certain henshin hero whose arms had been hardened and turned into blades. Naturally, Mutsuko couldn’t go quite that far, so she must have rigged

something up to imitate it.

“You can’t have a saber. It’s too dangerous.”

“Awww...” Mutsuko whined.

“Come on, you know it’s ridiculous! Put it back in right now!”

“I can’t! It’s a prototype! Once it’s out, I need to apply a lot of force to get it back in. We’d have to go home first...” She seemed to have used a powerful spring to get it to release, but hadn’t yet thought of how to get it to return.

Yuichi looked around the restaurant. Thankfully, there were no other customers around.

Tomomi made eye contact with him for a moment, then quickly tore her eyes away. As one of his classmates, she was well informed of Mutsuko’s eccentricities, and would probably look the other way. He shouldn’t have to worry about her.

Next, he checked Kanako’s reaction. She wasn’t looking at Mutsuko at all, but seemed to have partially retreated from reality. He shouldn’t have to worry about her, either. Kanako’s tendency, when seeing something out of the ordinary, was apparently just to ignore it.

“So you’re just gonna walk home with the saber out in the open?” Yuichi asked Mutsuko.

“Cool, huh?” Mutsuko struck a pose, apparently seriously believing this.

“The police will take you into custody!” he screamed.

He could just barely hear Natsuki whisper softly, “That might be for the best.”

Chapter 2: A Feast at the Noro Household

Noro's family regularly held banquets at their home.

They were grand affairs that brought the whole Noro clan together in a big hall, but Aiko wasn't fond of them, because the purpose of the banquets was to drink blood.

Without imbibing human blood, a vampire would weaken and eventually die. Aiko knew well enough from watching her sickly mother that their kind needed blood to survive.

She was told that they mainly used blood products made for transfusions, and their consumption was limited to nights of the banquets, likely due to the head of the household realizing that leaving them all to their own devices to find blood would quickly end in chaos.

Aiko had come home from her last day of tests, and spent some time brooding in her room. But as the hour of the banquet drew near, she put on her dress and headed for the dining hall, letting out a quiet sigh as she arrived. It was a disappointing way to end such an enjoyable day.

The participants — all members of the Noro clan, all vampires — were already lined up at the large table.

The seating placed the members of the immediate Noro family furthest in, and the more distant relatives nearer to the entrance.

The clan's leader, Aiko's father, Kazuya, sat at the furthest end of the table. He was a large man whose muscular physique was visible even under his suit. As director of Noro General Hospital, he had a very busy schedule, but he still seemed to manage to slip in a little weight training on the side.

Sitting across from Kazuya was her grandfather, Genzo, a kindly-looking old man with a very becoming mustache. He was French by birth, but had naturalized and changed his name after coming to Japan. He was also fluent in Japanese and had no trouble getting around.

Normally, the spot across from Kazuya would be reserved for Aiko's mother, Mariko, but she had remained shut up in her room for many years, and did not participate in the banquets.

Sitting to Kazuya's right was Aiko's big brother, Kyoya. He was a third-year at Seishin High School, the same one Aiko attended. The French in his blood was more prominent in his appearance, with deep-set features that set him apart from most Japanese boys. His hair was a sparkling silver that came down to his shoulders.

Huh? Silver?

It had been black just a little while ago... Had his condition gotten worse?

Kyoya's "condition" was middle school syndrome. His version of it was far more delusional than Yuichi's sister Mutsuko's. Merely being an actual vampire wasn't enough for him, since he still didn't have much in the way of power. His constant talk of being nobility and the "true race" bothered Aiko deeply.

At the moment, he was quietly playing with his wine glass. His mannerisms might look rather attractive to an outside observer, but the moment he spoke, Aiko knew it would shatter any illusions in that regard.

Aiko also had a big sister named Namiko, but she had gotten married and thus wasn't sitting with the Noro family. She sat a little ways away with her newborn baby.

The rest of the attendees were distant relatives from branch families. Aiko only knew about half of them.

There were about twenty in all, dressed in fabulous dresses and suits and chatting merrily. The whole affair felt like a throwback to a much earlier era.

Aiko sat down across from Kyoya, and the entire family was now present.

The table contained an extravagant selection of dishes, a consideration for people like Aiko who had qualms about drinking blood directly. Still, she found it hard to find them appetizing, knowing there was human blood mixed in.

"I heard you just started high school, Aiko. You've become such a beautiful young woman." A woman in a red dress, sitting to Aiko's left, addressed her.

“You’re looking as beautiful as ever, Auntie,” Aiko responded.

Eriko Kamiya was her mother’s sister. She was dressed in a flashy, cleavage-revealing dress that was very becoming on her, and lent her a seductive aura that made even Aiko’s heart race. She was over forty years old, Aiko knew, but she didn’t look much older than twenty.

Aiko felt a faint sense of suspicion. Her aunt had always looked very young, but had she always looked this young?

“Aiko, you really must get enough blood,” her aunt said. “You were blessed with a wonderful body. Don’t let it go to waste.” Eriko downed the red fluid in the wine glass. “It’s just heavenly. I wish I could drink it every day,” she continued, blissfully, running her tongue over her red-stained lips.

Just watching it made Aiko nauseous; there was no way she could enjoy it the way her aunt did.

She looked around the room at the others drinking their blood down straight from the glass. Those that did all looked extremely young, while those eating the blood mixed into food looked comparatively more aged.

“Aiko, you’re at just the right age to start. Don’t you want to preserve the beauty you have?” Eriko asked.

“I just don’t like the taste...” Aiko grumbled. She didn’t actually know how fresh blood tasted, but it seemed like the easiest way to end the discussion.

“Eriko, it’s up to the individual to decide. Don’t force her,” Kazuya admonished in a low voice.

“I’m not trying to force her. I just can’t understand why she doesn’t like the flavor. It’s so sweet,” Eriko responded. She looked unsatisfied.

“Aiko, you had your last final today, right? How did it go?” Kazuya asked, changing the subject.

“Hmm, about the same as midterms, I think...”

In other words, it had gone poorly. Aiko’s grades tended to be on the low side of average. She tried her best, but it never seemed to bear fruit.

“That’s not good. Why don’t you let me teach you?” Kazuya asked

enthusiastically. As a world-famous “super doctor,” it would be easy for him to teach a high school student.

“No, thanks. You’ve got too much to do, don’t you? I’m gonna ask a friend to teach me. He gets really good grades,” Aiko said, thinking of Yuichi. Despite not seeming to study often or pay much attention in class, he got good grades. She wasn’t expecting good marks on her finals, so she might ask him for help soon.

“I see. Perhaps studying with a friend would be better, then. By the way, you mentioned you were in the survival club at school, right? Is it dangerous?”

“It’s not dangerous at all. We mostly just sit in the club room and talk.” She opted not to mention that the things they talked about were dangerous. How would she explain to her father that “how to make bombs and stun guns” was one of their weekly themes?

“I see. Well, athletics have never been your strong suit. Maybe that’s the best kind of club for—” Kazuya was interrupted by Kyoya, who suddenly rose to his feet.

“I’ve had enough of this farce!” he shouted.

The entire hall went quiet.

“What’s wrong, Kyoya?” Kazuya asked. He sounded dubious about Kyoya’s sudden behavior.

“I’m sick of this ‘blood products’ nonsense! It’s ridiculous! Why should we eat this processed junk? Where is our pride as a noble clan? Shouldn’t we be sinking our fangs into necks and drinking fresh blood directly?”

“What are you talking about?” Kazuya asked, suspiciously.

Aiko had no idea what could have triggered the outburst, either.

All eyes focused on Kyoya. Seeming to wilt under the attention, Kyoya suddenly rushed out of the hall.

“Big Brother...” Aiko said.

“I wonder if he’s grown fangs...” she heard Eriko murmur from beside her.

It was a ridiculous thing to suggest. As far as Aiko knew, vampires, including

her brother, didn't have fangs. It was impossible for them to bite someone's neck and suck their blood.

Her father's voice broke through the silence in the room.

"Well, he's at a complicated age. We all went through the same thing when we were young, didn't we?"

That statement seemed to break the tension, setting everyone to talking about their own youths. The awkwardness over the proceedings dispersed.

"I'm rather worried. Perhaps I'll go check on him," Eriko said, standing up to leave.

As she did, Aiko caught a glimpse of her face. What she saw there sent a shot of anxiety through her...

Eriko was smiling.

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Kyoya's door wasn't locked, so Eriko opened it without knocking, and stepped inside.

It was a simple room with little in the way of possessions. Kyoya had thrown himself onto the bed and lay there, staring at the ceiling.

"Now, now. What's got you sulking?" she asked.

"What do you want?" Kyoya spat back, but he didn't try to drive her out. Perhaps he had remembered how often he and Eriko played together when he was young.

"I'm just a bit curious. Oof..." Eriko let out a middle-aged groan as she sat down on the bed.

He didn't particularly resist as she reached for his handsome face and lifted his lip with a finger. "I knew it. They've grown, haven't they?"

Kyoya's canines were longer and more pointed than most people's, a sign that he had been drinking human blood. Surely, drinking the fake stuff would set one on edge after tasting real blood for the first time.

"How many have you drunk from?" she asked.

That would also explain his behavior in the dining hall. Drinking blood increased erratic behavior, making the id more difficult to restrain.

“What are you getting at?” Kyoya asked, looking at Eriko.

Eriko pulled her own lip upwards to show him her canines. He watched as they began to elongate, eventually growing to twice the length of a normal person’s.

Kyoya sat up, his eyes opening wide in surprise.

“I think I’ve drunk from about ten,” Eriko said as she returned her fangs to their normal length. Having them out all the time would made it harder to talk.

“You can do that?!” Kyoya asked, drawing close to Eriko.

“Yes, and many other things, as well. For instance...” Eriko grabbed Kyoya’s shoulders.

Perhaps surprised by the suddenness of the gesture, Kyoya tried to shake her off, but couldn’t. Drinking blood had made Eriko much stronger.

She leaned in towards Kyoya’s neck and pierced it with her fangs, opening up two small holes from which she began to suck up the blood that welled up.

“What are you doing?!”

“Calm down. Those of the same clan cannot dominate each other by drinking their blood,” she said. The wound on Kyoya’s neck healed over quickly. “But this is one of the many things that I can do.”

Eriko could see a vision of herself licking her lips through Kyoya’s eyes. Kyoya could likely see himself through her eyes, too.

This was another of Eriko’s powers: the ability to share what she saw and felt with those she fed from.

“This is really possible?” Kyoya trembled with emotion. He must have found this power even more incredible than the elongating fangs.

“It seems to be a power meant to dominate those whose blood you drink, though it loses effectiveness if you get too far away.” Such abilities were a mere side effect to Eriko’s real goal, though.

“I’ve only drunk from one person,” Kyoya answered, belatedly, seemingly

thinking about something.

“Who was it? I hope it’s no one who will make trouble for you later.”

“A girl from my school. She’s in love with me, so she won’t make trouble.”

“Handsome men do have it easy. But I don’t think drinking from one person will be enough to make slaves of others, so you should remain cautious.”

“What should I do? Should I keep drinking blood?” Kyoya asked, eyes shining with hope.

Eriko found it very charming.

“Yes. But you can’t mature by only drinking from the same person. You must drink blood from many people. Many... you see?”

He was easier to manipulate than Eriko could have dreamed.

✻✻✻✻✻

The mood in the classroom was completely carefree.

It was Friday, the day after the last day of tests, and it was doubtful that anyone was really focusing on class. Yuichi was no exception, and spent most of the day partially zoned out.

As class came to an end, he took a look around.

Natsuki, apparently on class duty that day, was erasing the blackboard. She’d still need to write the class diary and submit it.

Aiko was talking with Tomomi about something. As he looked at her, she turned to him and lightly put her hands together, as if saying, “Go on without me.”

They’d see each other later, so there was probably no need for him to wait up. Yuichi slowly rose to his feet.

“Yu! Let’s walk to club together for once!” The door to the classroom slid open with unnecessary force, and Mutsuko’s voice came booming in.

A murmur ran through the classroom.

Yuichi wanted to clutch his head in his hands. Mutsuko was famous all over the

school, so there was no hiding it now. But that didn't mean he wanted her making a scene in front of everyone in his class, either.

"Hey! What's up?" Mutsuko asked, barging into the classroom to walk up to Yuichi.

All eyes were on Mutsuko. Beautiful women stood out, after all.

"Fine!" Consumed by a sudden need to be anywhere else at the moment, Yuichi grabbed Mutsuko by the hand and fled the classroom with her.

"Don't visit me in my classroom! It's embarrassing!" he complained once they were out of the building.

"Oh? Yu, that's such a siscon tsundere little brother thing to say! Now, dere it up! Say, 'But I'm so happy you came for me!' or something like that!" Mutsuko said excitedly.

"I'm not hiding some deep affection for you. I really don't like it, okay?"

"Oh, you," Mutsuko said, waving her arms around a little. "It's okay to let your big sister dote on you a little sometimes!" She didn't seem to be listening to him at all.

Remembering the incident from the day before, Yuichi checked out Mutsuko's outfit. She was wearing long sleeves again.

"You brought your saber, didn't you?" He was beginning to regret not checking earlier that morning. It could result in a tragedy if it came flying out while they were downtown.

"Oh, that! That extender device wasn't working out, so I'm modifying it! Look forward to it!"

"How are you going to use that, anyway?" The blade ran along the side of her arm. Yuichi assumed at first that it was supposed to be something like a tonfa, but it was fixed along the arm, so she wouldn't be able to spin it.

"I don't know. Maybe I'll use it like a rooster knife."

"What's that?"

"It's a weapon used in Baguazhang. Didn't I teach it to you?"

“You only taught me the Mandarin duck knife.” The Mandarin duck knife was a weapon used in Baguazhang shaped like a crescent moon. It was nothing like her saber, though, so he couldn’t see how the two were connected.

“It’s a weapon you wear attached to your arm, a complicated style-over-substance weapon covered in blades! Baguazhang’s founder, Dong Haichuan, developed it and it’s said that he loved it! My saber is a little simpler, but it’ll be used in a similar way, I think! Once I finish it, I’ll teach you how to use it, Yu!”

“I’ll pass on the saber, thanks.”

“Huh? But it’s so cool! So Guyver! So Baoh!”

“So it’s all about cosplay, huh?” Yuichi asked.

He ignored Mutsuko as she pouted behind him.

They headed past the sports field towards the old school building. It was hot here in early summer, but he could see the players running around energetically on the other side of the fence.

“Yo! Hey, Sakaki! On the way to club?”

Shota, dressed in his team uniform, called out to him through the fence. Yuichi remembered he’d rushed out the minute class ended. He must have gone to soccer practice.

“Sis, have you two met?” he asked. “This is Shota Saeki. He’s a soccer player, and he’s in my class.”

“Hello there! I’m Yu’s big sister, Mutsuko. Pleasure to meet you!”

“Oh, I’ve heard about you...” Shota responded with some hesitance. He must have remembered the rumors about her unfortunate personality.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know much about soccer. I hardly ever read soccer manga!” Mutsuko cried. All of Mutsuko’s knowledge came from manga. It was what she used to investigate and research things she was interested in. “But I do know a little about it! I practiced the Skylab Hurricane with Yu!”

“And they got mad at us because it was totally against the rules!” Yuichi shot back.

In the Skylab Hurricane, one person lay on the ground to serve as a springboard to send the other flying into the air, where they could headbutt the ball into the goal. Of course, it was against the rules for being extremely dangerous.

“Huh? Rules aside, is that even possible?” Shota tilted his head.

“Huh? Oh... uh, no, of course it isn’t.” The image of Mutsuko flying lightly through the air flitted through his mind and he tried to change the subject.

“Then, let’s see... we also tried to see if we could do the Explosive Disappearing Ball, but we just couldn’t make it work!”

“Yeah, because it’s physically impossible!” Yuichi shouted.

It was a bizarre goal shoot where you triggered an explosion in the ball right in front of the goalkeeper’s eyes to make it look like the ball had disappeared.

Yuichi had gotten to the point where he could hit a non-spinning ball with an overhead kick, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t get the most important part, where the ball seemed to explode and disappear in front of the keeper’s eyes. But that was only natural. It was a ridiculous move to begin with.

Yuichi decided to cut Mutsuko off before she could get too far into the tale of the True Soccer Warriors, Real Mannism, who used soccer to stand against an evil organization plotting soccer-based world domination. “Enough soccer talk, Sis. Let’s get going.”

The club room was as cluttered as ever.

As a former classroom in the old school building, it was quite large, but the library-like lines of shelves and ever-present clutter made it feel small and cramped.

The walls were lined with colorful protrusions called bouldering holds, which added even more to the room’s feeling of disorder. Yuichi seemed to be the only one who used the holds, as well.

At the center of the room sat a whiteboard and a long table, where Kanako sat, elegantly sipping tea. She projected the image of an ivory tower girl, though

her family was not especially rich.

Yuichi took his seat as Mutsuko moved to stand in front of the whiteboard. Aiko and Natsuki showed up not long afterward.

“Now, we’d better look lively, or summer vacation will start before we know it! We gotta get talking about our training camp!” Mutsuko said cheerfully.

Yuichi remembered the conversation they had had the day before in the Chinese restaurant. He’d assumed she was just getting carried away then, but apparently she was serious.

“If we’re gonna go, I wanna go somewhere fun!” she said. “Okay! Tell me your ideas!”

Yuichi really didn’t want to go, as it seemed like a giant pain, but he knew saying that would be pointless.

“Let’s have the camp at school. In this club room,” Yuichi ventured. It seemed the least of all possible evils.

“...Okay, fine. We’ll keep that as a candidate.” Mutsuko scowled a little, but still wrote Yuichi’s suggestion on the whiteboard.

Without prompting, Aiko, sitting beside him, began writing that in her notebook. At some point, she had grown accustomed to her secretarial duties.

“What about you, Noro?” Mutsuko asked.

“Let’s see. It’s summer, so I really think the beach would be best. Would it be better to go far away?”

“Good question. There’s a public swimming area nearby, but then we wouldn’t be staying overnight... Well, we can think about the place later. Beach, then. Next up, Takeuchi.” Mutsuko wrote the new candidate on the whiteboard.

“Noro. You are aware we’re discussing a training camp for the survival club, aren’t you?” Natsuki asked Aiko, coldly.

“Huh? I guess I wasn’t thinking about that... Well, Takeuchi, do you have a candidate?” Aiko huffed a little in reply. She apparently wasn’t expecting to be questioned on that.

“Yes. I recommend my junkyard as a training camp location,” Natsuki proclaimed unashamedly.

“What is that, exactly?” Yuichi asked, getting a bad feeling in his gut. The name didn’t make it sound like anywhere he’d want to be.

“It’s a place where failures are discarded. A secret location in the middle of nowhere, unmarked on maps. I once used it as hunting grounds. What do you think? It’s ideal for survival, isn’t it?” Natsuki said triumphantly to Aiko.

“No way! I’m not doing that!” Yuichi said vehemently.

Yuichi wondered what she meant by “failures,” but decided not to ask. It couldn’t possibly be any answer he wanted to hear.

“Nice! That sounds so exciting, Takeuchi!” Mutsuko cried.

Perhaps Natsuki and Mutsuko had similar tastes; Mutsuko liked ruins and secrets, after all.

“Well, Orihara? Any ideas?” Mutsuko asked Kanako as she wrote “junkyard” on the whiteboard.

“Is there a way we could travel to an isekai?” Kanako asked. It was a bizarre request — to want to travel to another dimension or time period.

“No!” Yuichi interrupted quickly. “And even if there were, we shouldn’t do it!”

“Do you have any leads?” Natsuki asked.

Even if she did, they shouldn’t do it, Yuichi protested internally.

“Um, well. I heard you can get to isekai through elevators!” Kanako said. She really did seem to enjoy isekai stories.

“Isn’t that an urban legend?” Yuichi asked. Even he had heard that story. If you pressed the floor buttons in the elevator in just the right order, it would take you to a nonexistent floor, which would lead you to another world.

“Search for the isekai elevator...” Mutsuko added to the whiteboard.

“Do you have any ideas, Sis?” he asked.

“Of course!” she proclaimed. “I was thinking we might go overseas!”

“Wait a minute! That’s too insane!” Countless objections popped into Yuichi’s head all at once. “Actually, I just realized a bigger problem. We don’t even have permission to do a training camp, do we? Does this club even have an advisor?”

Official club activities required an advisor, but Yuichi had never seen anyone like that around.

“It’s Ms. Nodayama, the grammar teacher! She told me I could do what I want, so I do!”

“And you don’t see any issue with your interpretation of ‘do what you want’?” He couldn’t imagine that the teacher had meant to give permission to stick bouldering holds in the wall and haul in bookcases by the dozens.

At the same time, he knew that if the grammar teacher Nodayama — in other words, Hanako — was their advisor, they would be fine. Hanako hated to be bothered about anything. She would never come all the way to the club room to tell them what to do.

“Where, specifically, do you want to go overseas?” Natsuki asked, dispassionately.

“What about Taiwan?” Mutsuko asked. “It’s a storehouse of martial arts! Martial arts were suppressed during China’s cultural revolution, so all the great martial artists escaped to Taiwan. That’s why Taiwan is full of master martial artists!”

“I think you’re the only one who would enjoy that, Sis,” Yuichi snorted. Though he couldn’t help but feel that that objection was coming a bit late. Their activities at the club tended to be whatever Mutsuko liked.

“Could we go to India to learn Kalaripayattu? Ah! Or we could learn ancient Muay Thai! Did you know that Muay Thai came from Indian Kalaripayattu? Or maybe... oh! What about England? The quarterstaff! I’m not talking about the old PC game; I mean the weapon!”

“Look, we’re not going to a foreign country! There are a lot of problems with that, and the first one is that it’s too expensive!” Yuichi shouted.

Mutsuko had combined a lot of different martial arts to create the one that Yuichi practiced, leading to something chaotic and baffling. So while he couldn’t

claim he had no interest in real martial arts, he wasn't so passionate about it that he would go overseas to do it.

"Um, if money's an issue, I could probably help out," Aiko said hesitantly.

Her family ran a hospital, and they were wealthy. Apparently Aiko had significant funds at her control, too.

"No," Yuichi objected. "No matter how much money you have, that doesn't feel right." He didn't like the idea of any one member shouldering all the burden for their training camp trip.

"Oh, I forgot to say this at the beginning, but the club funds can handle anything, so don't worry! Feel free to throw out even expensive ideas!" Mutsuko said.

"How much do you have in club funds to be able to cover an overseas summer training camp?!"

As might be suggested by the over-abundance of bizarre items crowding both Mutsuko's room at home and the club room, she had some mysterious source of funding. Yuichi had decided not to ask what it was, as he was pretty sure he didn't want to know the answer. In the end, they decided to rethink their ideas with the knowledge that money was now no object.

Chapter 3: Clash!! The Pink Clinic!

There was a hospital known as the Pink Clinic. Despite the name, it was a proper hospital in scale.

What differentiated a clinic from a hospital was primarily the number of beds: a facility with twenty beds or more was called a hospital.

The official name was Mochizuki Gastrointestinal Hospital. It had 72 beds and specialized in internal medicine. People just called it the Pink Clinic because for some reason, a lot of nurses there ended up dating patients.

They could have just called it the Pink Hospital, but perhaps “clinic” just rolled better off the tongue.

The hospital had closed several years ago, and no one knew why. It may have been the strange name, or the overall creepiness of the place. The building had since become a dwelling for the homeless and a meeting place for local delinquents. The neighbors had long complained to the authorities to get something done about it.

“Hey... I thought we were going home. How did we end up in here?” Aiko murmured, crouched behind the sofa.

“You said you smelled blood, didn’t you?” Yuichi, positioned beside her, whispered back.

They were in the hospital’s first floor lobby, hiding behind the sofa in the reception area.

Yuichi and Aiko had decided to walk home together after club, but as they had passed in front of the abandoned Pink Clinic, Aiko had stopped abruptly.

“Well... I didn’t mean to imply that we should go inside and check...”

The entrance to the hospital had been locked, but perhaps owing to the building’s age, the lock was a simple enough mechanism. Yuichi picked it easily enough and they had made it inside.

“We couldn’t just call the police. Who would believe us if we said ‘we were walking in front of the hospital and smelled blood’?” he responded. “It could be urgent. And anyway, you didn’t have to come with me.”

“I know, but I didn’t want to walk home alone...”

Was it an accident, or violence? The smell of danger was thick in the air, but Aiko had followed him without a second thought.

“But the smell of blood, huh? Well, if you didn’t say that kind of thing now and then, I’d forget you were a vampire.”

“I sort of wish you would forget, actually...”

They both peeked over the edge of the sofa toward the back of the lobby.

The windows were blocked off, so no light made it in from the outside, but the fluorescent lights of the lobby were on.

Near the middle of the lobby, some mean-looking characters were standing around a girl.

Her cheek was swollen as though she’d been hit. Blood was dripping from the corner of her mouth.

“I’ve got a really bad feeling about this...” Yuichi said with a scowl. It was easy to imagine what was going to happen next.

“We’ve got to help her!” Aiko responded in hushed tones, her face pale.

“That’s right. The question is, who they really are...”

There were six of them, not too many for Yuichi to handle. He could probably take out a hundred if he had to; his big sister’s training had prepared him to fight large numbers of opponents. The real problem was what Soul Reader revealed to him.

It wasn’t about the girl, who simply had “High School Student” written over her head.

Four of the assailants were labeled “Delinquent,” which also wasn’t a problem.

The issue was the remaining two, who bore the label “Vampire?”

What? What does the question mark mean?! Yuichi was getting pretty fed up

with his magic sight's irresponsibility.

"Hey, any clue about the two who are holding the girl down?" he asked.

The two "Vampire?"s were holding the girl from behind. She was trembling in fear, seemingly incapable of resisting as the four delinquents jeered obscenities at her.

"Huh? Why do you ask?"

"They're 'Vampire?'s."

"Why did you phrase that like a question?" Aiko asked.

"I have to. There's a question mark at the end of their label." It sounded ridiculous, but it was the simple truth.

"Uh? Um... I've never seen them before, but they don't look like members of my clan..." She was probably referring to the cheap, hoodlum-like air about them.

"Then I probably don't need to hold back. I doubt 'Vampire?'s could be all that tough, anyway."

"Hey, are you using me as the standard to base that on?" She puffed out her cheeks in annoyance. Well, she was right, he was. "Anyway, it's no time to worry about that! You've got to hurry!"

"I know, but if we just run out there, they'll learn who we are." Yuichi had taken out a group of delinquents once before, but it had ended up as a huge mess, with his family getting involved. Guys like these didn't think about consequences. Revealing his face to them could be bad in the long term.

"She keeps giving me weird masks and I always throw them away, but..." Yuichi began searching through his bag for something to cover his face. It was full of all kinds of things Yuichi didn't recognize. Mutsuko must have put them in without telling him.

"Um... I'm not gonna ask about that one..."

"Ugh, why are there panties in here?!" Yuichi threw a pair of women's underwear on the floor. They were pink and cute, and most likely Mutsuko's.

Then Yuichi trembled in terror. Had she intended for him to wear them on his face? He recalled her telling him once about a superhero who wore panties as a mask...

“Isn’t there anything else?” Aiko asked.

As he continued searching the bag, he found a flesh-colored mask with “Meat” written on the forehead, a white mask with flames around the eyes, and a mask shaped like a butterfly. Yuichi threw them to the floor, one after another.

But there wasn’t a whole lot better to choose from. He pulled out a skull-like mask that looked vaguely like it was meant for bondage.

“It’s pretty middle school, but it’s better than nothing. Here.” Yuichi put that one on, and handed another mask to Aiko. This one had a rabbit motif.

“Huh? I need one, too?”

“Just in case. Take this, also.” Yuichi handed Aiko a stun gun. It was the type meant for self-defense, that opened with the push of a button. Mutsuko had taught them how to use them during class. “Wear this, too.”

He pulled out a raincoat and handed it to her. The Seishin High girls’ uniform was recognizable, so it could cause trouble if they saw it. The boys’ uniform wasn’t particularly noteworthy, so there was no need to cover it.

He pulled out several stones from his bag and gripped them in his left hand.

“What are those?”

“Oh, throwing 500 yen coins all the time would get expensive, so I made these out of lead.”

“Hey. That reminds me, you still haven’t paid me back...”

Yuichi recalled the ten 500 yen coins he’d thrown at the serial killer on that day at school.

“Okay. Well, I’m off,” he said, intentionally deflecting the issue of money. “Hang on to my bag. Oh, and it could get bad if they hear our names, so be careful not to use mine.”

This wasn’t the time to be arguing about something that happened weeks ago,

he thought as he left his bag behind.

“...Is it just me, or are you really into this?” Aiko murmured.

Yuichi ignored that, too, and ran off.

Keeping low, he sneaked out from behind the sofa and got around behind the men. His first targets were the two restraining the girl. He gave them several swift kicks to the groin from behind.

“Huh?” The girl asked as she realized that the men were abruptly toppling over. Yuichi grabbed the girl’s shoulder and pulled her back roughly.

That left the other four. Yanking the girl behind him, Yuichi stepped closer to them, and held his right arm high and behind him.

His opponents hadn’t yet processed what was happening.

He planted the blade of his hand to two of the men’s necks and swung them downwards, slamming them both to the floor.

He let his momentum carry him into a turn, and chained that into a flying spin-kick that hit the third man in the back of the head and sent him flying into the ground.

The last of them finally seemed to realize what was going on, but Yuichi grabbed his hand and pulled him in closer, while striking him in the solar plexus with his elbow.

It was over in just a few seconds. The men all fell to the ground without even having the opportunity to mount resistance.

“U-Um...” the girl spoke up, slumped against the wall.

“Hey. Isn’t there a more peaceful way to do that? Like knock them out with a karate chop to the neck?” Aiko asked, catching up after it seemed everything was safe.

“You really think it’s that easy? If you want to disable someone, you’ve got to put them in a lot of pain.”

The men were currently disabled from their excruciating pain and fear.

“Are you okay?” Aiko asked the girl tenderly.

“Yes... um, who are you two?” The girl was clearly suspicious of the two people in their odd masks.

“What should we do?” Aiko asked in a low voice.

“We’ll just have to go on like this... Let’s see. We’re here to help, so there’s no need to worry about—” Yuichi froze up in the middle of speaking.

There were more people coming in from the entrance.

“There are a lot of ’em, huh?”

“There are a lot of them, yeah.”

Yuichi and Aiko exchanged a glance. There were ten of the men inside already, and more were coming in every second.

Many of their labels read “Delinquent” but about one in ten read “Vampire?” The delinquents wore a mismatched array of clothing, but the Vampire?s wore parkas despite the summer heat, with hoods hiding their faces.

They were probably comrades of the men currently sprawled on the floor. If so, then the minute they saw what was going on, they would react with hostility.

Yuichi looked around. He didn’t know the layout of the hospital, but the entrance seemed to be the only way out in their immediate surroundings. All the windows in sight were boarded up, and the same was probably true all around the hospital. Running around searching for a way out would just be a waste of time.

Break through them and make a run for the entrance, then?

Yuichi immediately gave up on the idea. He couldn’t do it while dragging both Aiko and the girl behind.

Yuichi saw the men beginning to murmur among themselves, pointing to the three of them.

“We’ll run further in! Follow me!” Yuichi shouted as he began to dash deeper into the hospital.

The sight he was waiting to see — the back entrance — soon came into view. He cast a glance over his shoulder.

The delinquents were pursuing, but there was still some space between them. They could make it out, Yuichi thought. But as he grabbed the doorknob, he immediately felt a sinking feeling in his stomach.

It wouldn't open.

If it was just locked, he could pick it easily enough... But as he looked up at the door, his jaw dropped:

It was welded shut. There was no way he could open it quickly enough to get away.

"Not good. We're cornered." Yuichi turned back to face their pursuers.

The mob had almost reached them.

There was a definite air of malice around them as they fanned out across the hall to cut off any means of escape.

"Bzzt! Wrong answer. Too bad."

"There's no way out, dumbass."

"What's with those masks? You think you're superheroes or something?"

"Is that a girl? That's good, I thought one wouldn't be enough."

"I'm okay with the boy too, personally."

The men had stopped, and began jeering crude remarks at them from a slight distance. Their leering grins were getting under Yuichi's skin.

"You two hide in the bathroom over there," he said. "Push up against the door, and if anyone tries to open it, stun gun the doorknob." The girls' bathroom near the back entrance had a door, which might help them buy some time.

Aiko and the girl ran obediently into the bathroom as Yuichi stepped forward.

He knew that if he waited for them to make the first move, he'd have to deal with a battle of attrition. Instead, he began dashing towards them swiftly, throwing the lead stones in his hand as he did.

When it came to the question of how best to engage with a large group of people, there were a variety of theories. Some believed that you should focus on the weakest-looking first, to deplete their numbers. Others thought you should

defeat the strongest first, to break morale and get them to run away.

Yuichi's strategy was something else.

Yuichi stopped in front of the closest man and spun around as he jumped, sending him flying with a whirlwind kick. The man bounced off the nearby wall and hit the floor in a heap.

Yuichi then landed and watched to see what effect the move had had on the others.

The crowd control tactic Mutsuko had taught him was to take out one opponent with the flashiest move possible, which was usually enough to cow the rest of the group.

The whirlwind kick was the perfect flashy move. Most people would be stunned into immobility after seeing someone deliver a leaping kick like that.

Indeed, it did seem to stun the delinquents for a moment, but then they fell on Yuichi, screaming.

If there had just been a few of them, the rest might indeed have run in fear. But their large numbers seemed to act as a shock absorber, the mutual peer pressure pushing back against any signs of timidity.

Oh, come on! Yuichi swore. As one of them rushed at him swinging a wooden sword, he pressed in closer and grabbed the man's elbow, yanking it upwards to knock him off balance and throw him backwards. The fall sent him crashing into a few of the comrades coming up behind him, slowing their advance at the same time.

A bat with a nail in it swept through the air towards him. Yuichi ducked as far as he could go and slipped underneath it, grabbed his opponent's leg and struck his knee. Then he dodged another blow from a hammer, and swept that attacker's leg.

Another arm thrust at him, holding a knife. He grabbed the arm, twisted it, and broke it at the elbow.

"No knives!" Yuichi shouted. "I'm trying to show restraint, here!"

Bringing out a knife in a crowded battle like this was the height of foolishness.

It wouldn’t hit Yuichi, but the man could have ended up stabbing one of his own.

Yuichi had no problem dealing with the unorganized horde, but the men soon seemed to realize they were making no progress as they were, and decided instead to form a wide circle around him and approach slowly. They must have realized that their best chance was to time it right and fall on him all at once.

Four of the men exchanged a look and then flew at Yuichi in a group.

If they came at him from all sides, he couldn’t get away, and even if he took down one or two, the others could subjugate him. Then once they had him held in one place, they could probably figure something out.

Such was likely their thought process. If so, they hadn’t realized that Yuichi still had one simple direction of escape: Up.

Yuichi kicked lightly off the floor and flew into the air, grabbing onto a lighting fixture in the ceiling to delay his fall.

As the men panicked at losing sight of their opponent, Yuichi plunged back down onto them with an axe kick.

In situations like these, the most important thing to do was to keep moving and not get caught.

Yuichi continued shifting his balance to avoid their attacks, distract them, and continue taking them down one by one.

It is said that it’s impossible to maintain a regimented fighting force once it’s suffered 30% losses. This gang hadn’t exactly been regimented to begin with, and the more they saw their numbers one-sidedly taken down, the more they seemed to awaken from their frenzy. They must have realized that if they kept going like this, they would end up on the floor like the others. Once half of them were down, their numbers gradually began to peel away.

“You... Don’t you realize who’s in our pack?” one man spat out at him, upon realizing he couldn’t win.

Yuichi just smacked him into the ground, head first.

Fortunately, his fall was broken by another man who was already on the floor.

All that remained was a lone “Vampire?” who stood there, seemingly

unperturbed by the mayhem Yuichi had inflicted. It occurred to Yuichi that this was probably the gang's boss.

"If you hadn't been so strong, I might've shown you a real good time... but now you're dead, okay?" the man said.

It just sounded like bluffing to Yuichi, though. This man wasn't that different from the ones already on the ground. Once he beat him, this would all be over. But just as Yuichi was about to take a step, the man suddenly changed.

His face began to transform.

Yuichi stood there in surprise as the man's nose and mouth began to elongate and jut forward. His face grew fur, and his ears wriggled as they crawled up to the top of his head. Just like that, his face was now that of a dog's.

The "Vampire?" label turned into "Anthromorph (Wolf)."

The sight of a man's face transforming into a dog's face before his eyes was so unreal that it gave Yuichi pause.

But "pause" was all it was. Despite his surprise, Yuichi proceeded with his original plan, rushing towards the man and striking him on both sides of the face with his fists in a move similar to Tai Chi's "Strike the Ears" technique.

The anthromorph hit the ground like a sack of potatoes. Yuichi was relieved to see it; the changing position of the man's ears had left him a little uncertain of where to strike, but it seemed that it hadn't mattered.

"Who is this guy?" Yuichi muttered to himself, looking down at the fallen man. The man's face looked normal now, but he was sure he hadn't just imagined it. He remembered the feeling of the fur on his fists.

It was certainly strange, but Yuichi didn't have time to think about that right now. He looked around. None of the men around him were moving, and the ones who had run away showed no sign of returning.

"Jeez... what a mess," Aiko said in exhaustion as she came out of the bathroom.

Yuichi hadn't even broken a sweat; Mutsuko's training had prioritized efficient use of stamina. He had taken down half of the group, about twelve of them,

before the rest had run off. But even if he'd taken on them all on, it probably wouldn't have worn him out too much.

The girl came out after Aiko and stood there, stock still, gazing in shock at the men who littered the hallway.

"Um... This is..."

"It's a secret, okay?" Aiko offered of her own initiative.

"Anyway, we should get going," Yuichi said. "The guys who ran away might come back."

They stepped over the fallen men to return to the entrance.

It didn't seem like anyone was waiting to ambush them outside, so they managed to escape the hospital without any trouble.

They headed for the Chinese restaurant, Nihao the China, under the assumption that they wouldn't get too many questions about the injured girl there.

"So many customers!"

Tomomi Hamasaki was there in her cheongsam, sounding wholeheartedly shocked.

"There are only three of us," Yuichi protested.

"No, no, no, Sakaki. To have three people come here at this time of night is impressive, you know? Yes, yes."

"Hey, that was a pretty random 'yes, yes.' Shouldn't it just be 'impressive, yes, yes'?" Yuichi sighed, feeling a bit fed up with Tomomi's inconsistent speech tic usage.

"I didn't see a lot of customers here during the day, either..." Aiko murmured. She seemed worried about Nihao the China's business.

She and the waitress seemed pretty close, Yuichi noted, as they headed for the round table.

They sat the girl down in a chair where Yuichi could examine her wound.

Fortunately, it wasn't terribly bad; just a small cut in her mouth. At Yuichi's prompting, Tomomi prepared a plastic bag filled with ice, which he put to the girl's cheek.

"It should be okay after you cool it down for a while, but if you're still worried, you should go to the hospital," he said.

Once the girl seemed to have calmed down, Yuichi and Aiko both sat down, as well.

"Hey, Sakaki. Do you do this a lot?" Aiko asked, curiously.

"Well... if someone's in trouble, and you're there, you have to help them, right? Though I don't usually see things on that scale in this area..." Yuichi racked his brain, trying to think of who might be behind something like this.

He was pretty sure he had cleared up most of the likely bad guys who lived in the area, though. If they had just been goons, that wouldn't have bothered him. But seeing the "Vampire?" label, and the way it had suddenly changed to "Anthromorph (Wolf)," bothered him.

Yuichi asked the girl what had happened, but all she remembered was being suddenly attacked while she was downtown.

"So you didn't know them, huh? They probably won't bother you anymore, but if anything happens, contact me. I'll give you my number." Yuichi exchanged cell phone numbers with the girl.

"Hey, Sakaki. Do you do *this* a lot?" Aiko asked, exasperatedly.

"Huh?" He had a feeling she'd just asked him that, with a slightly different nuance this time.

Chapter 4: A Heart-Pounding First Date! (With Little Sister Along)

Giant stuffed animals towered over everything. They were the defining trait of Aiko's room.

They were a type of teddy bear called a "Cheeky," made by a company called Merrythought, and known for their large heads and broad foreheads which made them look like babies. The biggest of them would require two arms to carry, but there were other stuffed animals around it, too many to count.

Apparently, at some point when she was very small, Aiko had expressed a fondness for them, and her father had proceeded to buy them for her from then onward.

Aiko wasn't happy about always getting teddy bears as presents. It didn't seem appropriate for a girl in high school, but she had long since given up hope in her father developing better taste in gifts.

Anyway, teddy bears might be an easy stopgap gift, but they were still an expression of love. And it wasn't as if she hated them, so she decided to continue accepting them, graciously.

The next most notable feature in Aiko's room was the pink and white coloring.

White was the base color for the furniture and interior decorations. Fabric-based furnishings like the curtains, the sofa, and the bed cover were all a pale pink. Aiko herself had handled the coordination, but she was nagged by the thought that she had gone too far with it.

It was a bit too girlish, and she was a little embarrassed to show it to others. Whenever her friends came to visit, they always called it "kind of amazing," and she was never sure if they were being sincere or sarcastic.

Aiko was lying on her bed in that room in pink pajamas, hugging a stuffed animal to her chest. She was thinking about what had happened that afternoon.

Yuichi had been so reckless. He had run into that abandoned building and saved the girl being attacked, just because of Aiko's comment about how she'd smelled blood.

He hadn't even hesitated. He'd treated it as if it went without saying that he'd do it.

Yuichi called his sister strange, but he was plenty strange on his own.

Well, I guess I'm just as bad for going along with it... Aiko thought.

He'd incapacitated a dozen people in a flurry of punches and kicks. Most people would find violence like that shocking, but Aiko hadn't done much more than wrinkle her nose. She seemed to be getting used to this kind of thing.

Would this keep happening if she kept hanging out with Yuichi and the others?

That's right, Yoriko mentioned something like that...

When they'd first met, she had said, "My brother is merely attempting to aid a person in need." In other words, this was something Yuichi did regularly.

Ah, that reminds me...

She had never properly thanked Yoriko for lending her that underwear. She wanted to do something nice for her, but she couldn't figure out what, and so had ended up putting it off. It felt a little vulgar to just pay her for them, and boorish to buy her the same set of underwear.

It should be something that will really make her happy... she thought. But it was hard to figure out what that would be. She had only talked to Yoriko that one time at Yuichi's house, and had no idea what she liked.

Aiko rolled over, her eyes falling on the cell phone next to the bed. *Maybe I could ask Sakaki about it...*

She didn't know if Yuichi would know Yoriko's tastes or not, but it seemed like a good reason to try calling him for the first time.

She would feel a little self-conscious calling him for no reason, but there should be no problem with calling to ask for help with a thank-you gift.

She thought back to how casually Yuichi had exchanged phone numbers with

the girl he had just met that afternoon. Maybe Yuichi exchanged numbers and talked that casually with every girl. If so, then there was no need to be shy about it.

Aiko reached for her phone, and with a little trepidation, dialed Yuichi's number.

It was Saturday, the next day, and a little before noon.

Aiko was walking the station concourse where they said they would meet up.

There was an objet d'art there that resembled a carillon with a clock and bell that was often used as a meet-up spot. Mist sprayed down from the ceiling, cooling off the whole area. At exactly noon, the clock began to play a song made popular by a local band.

Yuichi was already there, right on time.

He was dressed in a light jacket, navy blue jeans, and gray sneakers. Aiko had never seen Yuichi in street clothes before, but she found them very flattering on him.

Aiko was about to call out when she noticed there was a girl with him. The girl was hanging close to Yuichi, inside his personal space, suggesting either a girlfriend or family.

As Aiko stood there for a moment in surprise, the beautiful girl suddenly came running up to her.

The girl took Aiko's hand and pulled her some ways away from Yuichi.

"Huh?" Aiko stood there, bewildered, as the girl pressed closer to her and hissed:

"What, exactly, is the meaning of this, Noro? My brother and I are here today to go clothes shopping. It was supposed to be me and him. Just me and him!"

It was Yoriko, Yuichi's little sister. She was wearing a sleeveless blouse and a miniskirt, a brazen display of naked arm and leg that drew the attention of everyone around them. She looked so unlike a middle school student in her street clothes that Aiko hadn't recognize her immediately.

Aiko wondered how to proceed. She had come to buy a present for Yoriko, but she couldn't exactly do that while she was around.

"Um, remember how I borrowed your clothes before? I wanted to buy something you would like as a thank-you, and I asked Sakaki what that might be, and he said he was going out today and I should come along... I didn't know he'd made plans with you, and he didn't tell me, either..." Aiko said, her words containing no small amount of reproach for Yuichi's thoughtlessness.

"I see," Yoriko spat venomously. "I do you a favor, and this is how you repay me? Using a present for me as a pretense to come here, all giddy and dressed to the nines?"

"You don't have to put it that way..." Aiko looked down at her own outfit. It was a sleeveless, frilly white dress under a tiered cardigan, a white pochette slung over her shoulder, socks with lace and ribbons on them, and camel-colored wedge pumps. She couldn't deny she had put some effort into how she was dressing.

Yoriko continued to glare at her. She must have really been looking forward to this outing, Aiko thought.

"Maybe I should just go..." she said, feeling aghast at Yuichi's insensitivity. If he'd already made plans with Yoriko, he should have just turned her down.

"Don't you think it's a bit late for that? If you just leave now, my brother's going to worry about you!" Yoriko snapped.

Aiko looked in Yuichi's direction. Yuichi met her eyes and waved. It really would be hard for her to leave now...

"I guess you're right..." Aiko admitted.

Yoriko bowed her head and sighed deeply, then looked up again. "Very well. There's nothing we can do about it now, so I'll allow it. But try to avoid clinging to my brother excessively, won't you?"

"I wasn't planning on it!" Aiko snapped back, her face turning red. Yoriko just gazed at her skeptically.

Together, the three of them headed to the large shopping mall attached to the

station.

“Sakaki... If you were going out with Yoriko, you should have told me...” Aiko said, with a touch of resentment.

“I thought having Yori here would speed things up. If you want to know what someone likes, you should just ask them directly, right?” he responded.

“I don’t mind!” Yoriko added cheerfully, as if the hostile encounter before had never happened. “I’m so happy I get to go shopping with Noro!”

How two-faced can you get?! Aiko thought.

Yoriko took Yuichi’s arm, and thus they walked together in a line: Yuichi, Yoriko, then Aiko.

“Hey, isn’t it a little odd for a brother and sister to walk arm in arm?” Aiko couldn’t help but ask.

Yoriko just scowled and whispered back, “I believe I told you not to meddle unnecessarily in our business, didn’t I?”

Aiko fell into stunned silence, and moved around to walk next to Yuichi. She couldn’t link arms or hold hands or anything, of course, and maintained a certain distance. She could feel Yoriko staring daggers into her.

“Sakaki, you were going clothes shopping, right? What kind of clothes are you looking for?” Aiko asked, ignoring Yoriko’s glare.

“Something that goes well with these jeans, I guess. My big sister keeps yelling at me to wear them,” Yuichi said, pointing at his jeans. They looked like ordinary navy blue jeans.

“That’s right! Big Sister isn’t usually picky about what people wear, but she does pick up the occasional strange obsession,” Yoriko said, butting in. “These are apparently made out of special fibers using a particular process that makes them more sturdy than most.”

“Mutsuko does like things like that, huh? Your sneakers look a little strange, too. Are those also from her?” Aiko asked, looking down at Yuichi’s feet. The sneakers didn’t seem that unusual at a glance, but when she looked closer, she saw they had no laces.

“That’s right, but... look, I know what you’re getting at, okay? I can refuse, and she doesn’t force it. She just starts pouting, is all.”

“I bet she would.” It was easy for Aiko to imagine.

“Ah, those are made from special materials to be extra sturdy, too. They don’t have laces because they’re fit in with air pressure,” Yoriko offered.

“Your big sister really likes those special materials, huh?”

As they chatted, they finally arrived in the shopping mall, then headed together to a casual clothes shop, where Yoriko swiftly began to root through the racks.

Yuichi didn’t seem to have any interest in picking out clothes himself. He just stood a few steps behind Yoriko as she looked around. Aiko, despite not being asked, decided to take a little initiative to search for clothes that would look good on Yuichi.

“When he asks our big sister to buy clothes, she buys the most ridiculous things,” Yoriko said.

“Ah, I think I know what you mean...”

“I mean, really. Chainmail? It’s outrageous.”

“Huh?” *Chainmail?* That wasn’t a word that came up often in casual conversation...

“She brings him bulletproof vests, too. Who would ever wear such a thing in everyday life?”

“Where do they even sell things like that?” The image of Mutsuko proudly showing off a bulletproof vest rose unbidden to Aiko’s mind. It was too easy to imagine.

“And even when she does pick out normal clothes, they’re always black. She wants him in black from head to toe! So obviously, I can’t leave her to handle the coordination of his wardrobe.”

“You two seem to be getting along, huh?” Yuichi said as he watched the two of them pick out clothes.

Sure, superficially... Aiko thought.

“Oh, we just get along *so* well! Isn’t that right?” Yoriko chirped to Aiko.

“Y-Yeah, I guess so...”

“Big Brother, how do you like this?” Yoriko asked, producing a snug-fitting shirt and jacket similar to the one he was already wearing.

“Well, I don’t know...” Yuichi said as he took the shirt from her. “Noro, did you pick one out, too?”

“Huh? Oh, no!” Aiko was holding a T-shirt with an incomprehensible English logo. It was awkward to be found picking out something she hadn’t been asked for.

Yoriko hid her face from Yuichi and chuckled. There was no right or wrong when it came to picking out clothes, but Aiko still felt like she had lost in some way.

“I’ll go buy them, then. There are lots of people in line, so it may take a while,” Yuichi said, taking the shirt from Aiko.

“Huh?” Yoriko said in surprise. She clearly hadn’t been expecting him to buy the shirt Aiko picked out.

Yuichi went off to stand in line, leaving Aiko and Yoriko to wait near the entrance to the store.

“Why were you picking out clothes for him, Noro? Are you trying to act like his girlfriend or something?” Yoriko demanded. The minute Yuichi was gone, her attitude did a total 180.

“I could ask you the same thing, Yoriko,” Aiko shot back, feeling a little sick of her constant needling.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m trying to do. Is there something wrong with that? Is there something wrong with acting like my big brother’s girlfriend?”

“Huh?” Aiko hadn’t expected her to admit to it outright. “Um, well... I guess... there isn’t? Huh?”

Aiko thought about it, but she couldn’t work out a proper argument.

“If my brother ever gets a real girlfriend, I’ll step back. But right now I’m not causing anyone any trouble, am I?” Yoriko demanded.

“I guess... not?” Aiko tilted her head. It did have a certain logic.

“But what was with that shirt you picked out? Was that some kind of strategy? Picking out weird clothing so he finds you charmingly klutzy?”

“What, was it not good?”

“It was so plain... You have to think about the balance,” Yoriko said, gazing at her with disgust. She couldn’t seem to understand Aiko’s taste in clothing.

“But, well, in the end, my brother did buy the weird shirt you picked out. And I think he liked it more than mine, which gets under my skin.”

“Um, I think you’re making too much of it...”

“It’s all right. Now, exactly how far has your relationship with my brother progressed? The way you address each other seems much less formal than it was the last time you visited our house.”

“Is that really important? We’re still just using last names...”

“It *is* important! He calls me ‘Yori,’ okay? It’s a childish nickname! I’ll probably be Yori for the rest of my life!”

“Um, I guess we have gotten a little more friendly. But... it’s not what you think!”

“Isn’t it?” Yoriko asked, eyes narrowed. She didn’t seem to believe her. “If I weren’t here, this would be a date, wouldn’t it? Two people don’t go shopping together if they don’t have a relationship, do they?”

“Huh? Well, I don’t know...” Aiko couldn’t quite figure out how to argue. Yoriko was right that most people would consider an outing like that a date.

“Allow me to make my position clear. Noro, you are the person I most need to keep my eye on. My brother has never brought a girl home before! And he’s never been on such casual terms with one, either. I don’t understand it! He’s barely been in high school for a few months! The club he’s in is all girls, too, and I heard he even has a beautiful girl from his class cozying up to him!”

She must have been talking about Natsuki Takeuchi, who certainly did seem to nurture an affection for Yuichi.

“In fact, this is an excellent opportunity,” Yoriko said. “Why don’t you tell me what things are like for my brother at school? Starting with that cat in heat.”

“Cat in heat?” Aiko mouthed, incredulously. “Okay, fine. The girl you’re talking about is probably Natsuki Takeuchi. She’s certainly beautiful, and while she is assertive, I’m not sure I’d say she’s cozying up... Well, I guess I did see her hug him recently.”

“Do you know where she lives?”

“Why do you want to know?!”

“I want to meet her.”

Aiko decided not to mention that she’d also been embraced by, carried by, and had her skirt flipped up by Yuichi, too. “You probably shouldn’t. She’s... kind of dangerous.”

“Oh? I think I can handle myself. There aren’t many women who can beat me in a fight.” Yoriko sounded fairly confident, and she was Mutsuko and Yuichi’s sister, so maybe she knew some martial arts. But this wasn’t just any girl they were talking about — it was a serial killer.

“So? Any other girls?” Yoriko prodded.

“Takeuchi’s the only one who’s interested in him that way. You can probably relax. Most of the others don’t care.”

“Why not?!” Yoriko shouted, apparently surprised by this revelation.

“He seems to keep the rest of his classmates at arm’s length... I always thought that was a little strange, actually,” Aiko added. “What was he like in middle school?”

“No one dared approach him as long as I was watching him.” Yoriko grinned.

Aiko was a little afraid to ask what exactly it was that she’d done.

“I’m back. Should we go looking for Yori’s present next?” Yuichi asked as he returned from paying at the register.

Aiko's original objective had been to find a present for Yoriko, but having her along seemed to defeat the point. She thought about asking to pass for the day.

"Is there anything you want, Yori?" Yuichi asked, regardless. He didn't seem to find anything wrong with the arrangement.

"Big Brother. The point of a present is to show that you thought hard about what the person would like, or what would look good on them. Asking me what I want defeats the point." Yoriko seemed rather perturbed by her brother's lack of sensitivity, as well.

Her response left Yuichi looking crestfallen.

"Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to make you feel bad!" Yoriko amended, quickly. "I know! It's a thank-you for the underwear, right? Then it should be underwear!"

Aiko watched her with a smile. Yoriko could be overbearing towards her, but it was probably just a sign of how much she loved her brother. Maybe, Aiko thought, she wasn't such a bad kid.

Underwear of every color of the rainbow was spread out before them. Aiko was blown away.

She had never been to a store like this before.

Aiko didn't really see the point of "fashion" that you only saw for a half-second while you were getting changed. As long as they were clean, that was all she cared about.

"Wow... underwear is expensive, huh?" Yuichi's blasé tone snapped Aiko back to reality. She looked over to see him staring at the price tag on a bra.

"H-Hang on, Sakaki! Why are you in here with us?"

"Huh? We're buying underwear for Yori, right?" Yuichi looked at Aiko in puzzlement.

"Yes, but this isn't a place where boys should be!" Aiko looked hurriedly around, expecting to see everybody staring at them. But contrary to her expectations, nobody seemed to mind.

“It’s okay. It just looks like he’s here with his girlfriend,” Yoriko said nonchalantly in the face of Aiko’s panic. Of course, she made it sound like *she* was that girlfriend.

“Really?” Aiko asked.

“Yeah. Lots of men go with their girlfriends to pick out underwear. Noro, have you never bought underwear at a lingerie shop before?” Yoriko asked penetratingly, as if paying close attention to Aiko’s odd behavior.

“Um, I just buy whatever’s functional...”

“You need to try your underwear on in a specialty shop before you buy it. All underwear has special properties. You can’t just choose a bra randomly based on cup size.”

Aiko felt a little ashamed about having a middle school girl lecture her on underwear selection.

“Okay, I’ll go try these on,” Yoriko said, picking out some pieces to take to the changing room.

While she was gone, Aiko sidled up to Yuichi. “Hey. About what we talked about on the phone yesterday. You should sneak out and go looking for it now. This is probably the best time.”

“You don’t think the underwear is enough?”

“That’s just giving back what I borrowed from her. And I don’t think it works if it’s something she asked for.”

“Is that right? So I just pick out something with the money you lent me?”

“Yeah. I won’t tell you to pay me back if you have some left over, but don’t be stingy, either, okay?”

Yuichi finally seemed to relent, and left the lingerie shop, scratching his head. Aiko breathed a sigh of relief as she watched him go.

But there really are a lot of them, huh? Aiko thought, lifting up a piece of underwear with a bold design.

“Noro!”

Aiko jumped as she was suddenly addressed. She turned around to see Yoriko beckoning her into the changing room. Thinking she might need help, Aiko went to join her. “What’s wrong?”

Yoriko immediately reached out and pulled her into the room.

“Huh? What is it?”

“Nothing. Anyway, take off your clothes.” Yoriko was already in her underwear. She was busty for a girl in middle school, as Aiko had already noticed the first time they’d met.

“But why?!”

“You can’t try on underwear if you don’t take your clothes off!”

“I’m sorry, I have no idea what you’re talking about...”

“As long as you’re here, you should buy some, too. You need a bra that really fits you. I can’t stand watching people slack off about this kind of thing. It drives me nuts.”

Aiko cast Yoriko a dubious glance. It was hard to believe she was really doing this out of the kindness of her heart.

“Well, and I guess I’m also scouting you out. Anyway, take it off. I won’t accept your present if you don’t.”

Grudgingly, Aiko relented, and began to take off her clothes, as she was told.

“Huh? You’ve got such a childish face, I figured you’d have the body to match, but you’re actually pretty curvy...” Yoriko scrutinized Aiko’s body with some degree of surprise.

“C-Could you not stare at me?” It was a little embarrassing, even if they were both girls.

“But that drab underwear is not helping...”

“What’s the big deal? Isn’t it better for you if I’m not very sexy?”

“Oh? Why would that be better for me? What are you basing that on? What an annoying thing to say...”

“I didn’t mean anything all that serious by it...” She might not be a bad kid, but

Aiko still found her paranoia a little scary.

After a few moments' thought, Yoriko moved around behind her, and in an instant, had unhooked Aiko's bra.

"Huh?!"

"Now, now, don't try to resist. No ordinary girl can read my movements."

"Eek!"

A new bra was on her in a flash. Aiko let out a cry of shock as the hands came around to grab her from behind. Yoriko giggled at first, then stopped, standing stock still.

"This is... I mean, I thought we were about the same size, but..."

"H-Hey! Stop! That tickles!"

Yoriko mumbled sourly as she secured Aiko's breasts inside the bra cups.

Once everything was in place, Aiko cast a glance at the mirror. What she saw sent a shock of delight through her: She had cleavage.

Aiko ended up buying underwear for both Yoriko and herself.

Then they met up with Yuichi, headed for the food court, and secured a table for four. Yuichi sat on one side, with Aiko and Yoriko across from him.

“You wouldn’t believe how cute Noro was acting, shouting ‘Cleavage! I’ve got cleavage!’” Yoriko announced.

“Hey! I told you to stop saying that!” Aiko felt a bit embarrassed about how excited she had been.

“Is that all the shopping we need to do?” Yuichi asked. “If so, I guess we can go home after we eat.”

“Huh?” Aiko asked, surprised. She had assumed they would spend a little more time window shopping.

“So *this* is why you can’t get a girlfriend,” Yoriko muttered, as if making a connection.

“Sakaki, you’ve never had a girlfriend?” Aiko asked, surprised by Yoriko’s revelation.

“Is there some reason you need to know?” Yoriko whispered, lightly kicking Aiko in the shin.

“I don’t know! It just seemed like a natural question! You’re the one who brought up girlfriends, Yoriko...” Aiko whispered back.

“I haven’t,” Yuichi responded, without a trace of defensiveness.

“D-Do you want one?” Aiko asked, feeling slightly emboldened.

Yoriko’s face screwed up again. “Seriously, why do you want to know? Then again, I’ve never heard him explain his views on romance... so let’s hear it.” Yoriko seemed to have talked herself out of her newly-building head of steam.

“You’ve never talked to him about it?” Aiko asked.

“Of course not! That would be ridiculous!” Yoriko exclaimed.

Yuichi ignored the girls’ whispering and began to explain. “Let’s see, how to put it... Well, for example, look around you.”

At his prodding, Aiko did so.

The men around them all hastily averted their eyes, indicating that they had been looking at her.

“It’s always like this around my sisters. You know? The way the men look at them. Horny, leering, pathetic... They basically drool over them, you know?”

“And?” Aiko asked, squinting in non-comprehension.

“I’m a little repulsed by the idea of being like them.”

“I’m not sure one necessarily follows the other...” Aiko murmured. She couldn’t imagine Yuichi with a lecherous expression at all. He probably wouldn’t turn out like that.

“Well, it’s hard to explain exactly, but that’s just how I feel,” Yuichi said.

“I see. So if I keep making men act horny and gross around me, you’ll be so disgusted that you won’t try to get a girlfriend?” Yoriko whispered.

“Yoriko...” Aiko sighed in response. She didn’t like where this was going.

After a few moments, Aiko met Yuichi’s eyes and gave him a nod as a signal.

Yuichi picked up on it and nodded in response. He then placed a paper bag on the table. He pulled from it a long, thin box wrapped in paper, and handed it to Yoriko.

“Here, your present.”

“Huh?” Yoriko looked to Aiko, then Yuichi. She seemed absolutely baffled as to why Yuichi would be giving her a present. “Can I open it?” she asked.

Yuichi nodded.

She opened the thin parcel. Inside was a rather expensive-looking ballpoint pen. “This is...”

“You mentioned before that your pen had run out of ink, so...” Yuichi said shyly as he scratched the back of his head.

“That’s too practical. I give it a four out of ten,” Aiko commented snarkily.

But it seemed good enough for Yoriko, who was so happy that tears were

forming at the corners of her eyes.

“Thank you, Big Brother! I’ll treasure it always!” She took the pen in both hands and clutched it to her chest.

“Really, it’s not that great...” Yuichi said, slightly abashed.

Aiko was just relieved that she liked it.

After the meal, Yuichi joined them for a walk around the shopping mall. Perhaps the two girls had worn down his resistance.

They played around with little regard for the time, until evening fell. Then they left the station and headed for Aiko’s house.

Yuichi walked a few steps ahead of Aiko and Yoriko, who were side by side.

“The present was your idea, right, Noro? My brother would never think to do that on his own,” Yoriko whispered to her.

Certainly, it would have been a bit odd for Yuichi to buy Yoriko a present for lending Aiko clothes, but Yoriko seemed to have figured out the situation, more or less.

As there was no point in hiding it anymore, Aiko explained that she had decided receiving a gift from her brother would make Yoriko happiest, so she had given Yuichi some money and told him to pick out a present for her.

“But it was Noro’s money in the first place, so make sure you thank her,” Yuichi said to Yoriko, overhearing their conversation. It seemed like a very “big brother” thing to do, Aiko thought.

“But I didn’t give any input on the present selection, so the choice still came fully from Sakaki,” Aiko added.

“Right! Thanks, Noro!” Yoriko’s smile to Aiko, this time, seemed completely sincere.

Her personality could be a bit grating, Aiko thought, but that smile was genuine.

They arrived at Aiko’s house soon enough. The Sakaki residence was closer to the station than hers, but Yuichi had offered to walk Aiko home first.

“See you later,” Yuichi said, just as they arrived at the gate. Apparently, he thought that was far enough. Aiko felt a little sad that he didn’t even want to linger.

As Yuichi turned to leave, Aiko assumed Yoriko would follow him. But she drew close to Aiko instead.

“I’m in a good mood today, so I’ll forgive you for thinking you were going on a date.” She was acting so cheerful, it was hard to believe this was the same girl who had been so crabby that afternoon at the meeting spot.

“I didn’t think... it was a date...” Aiko trailed off, lacking the force of her convictions. If it had just been the two of them, it definitely would have been a date.

“You’re a nicer person than I thought you were, Noro,” Yoriko said. “But I’m not going to let you beat me!” With that, Yoriko ran off after Yuichi.

“Why is she acting like it’s a competition? She’s his little sister...” Aiko murmured in confusion, then put her security card into the terminal beside the gate.

As she entered the house, she was greeted by a surprising sight. Her father was there, pacing about restlessly, like a bear at the zoo.

“O-Oh! Is that you, Aiko? I see you’re home!” he said with practiced casualness.

“Dad, you’re home early today...” Normally, he would be busy with work at this time of day. He even worked on Saturdays, and was rarely back by this hour.

“Y-Yes. But I do come home early sometimes. By the way, where were you today? I know it stays light longer nowadays, but I can’t approve of you coming home too late...” Kazuya said with concern. He didn’t seem angry with her, but Aiko still felt a bit ashamed.

“I’m sorry. I went out with a friend, and we weren’t paying attention to the time.”

“I-I see. A friend, eh? It’s good to have friends... Of course, this was a female friend, right?” It was clear he wanted her to deny it. That was the kind of person

he was.

“It was a boy, actually,” Aiko answered honestly.

Kazuya’s eyes widened, causing Aiko to take a step back. He could be a little bit scary.

“I knew it! Wh-What are you thinking? No, it’s not that I’m mad at you, I... I just can’t believe it. You’re really dating...”

Dating... When he put it that way, Aiko suddenly felt embarrassed. “W-We’re not! We just went shopping. His little sister was there.”

“Are you seeing each other?” Kazuya asked timidly.

“Of course not!”

“W-Well, it would be all right if you were. You’re free to pursue romance as you see fit. I’m your father. I won’t stand in your way. B-But still, I can’t rest easy until I see for myself what kind of man he is. I know! Why don’t you bring him here sometime?”

“I told you, it’s not like that!” Aiko yelled back in annoyance. Why did he have to get ahead of himself that way?

“Th-That’s right. Ah! It’s almost summer vacation. Why don’t we go somewhere for once?” Apparently detecting the anger behind Aiko’s glare, Kazuya conspicuously changed the subject. He had always been soft on Aiko, and he was afraid of upsetting her in the slightest.

“Our club’s going to go somewhere for a summer training camp, but we don’t have any plans yet,” Aiko said, turning him down. Then she suddenly remembered. “That’s right, Dad. Don’t we have a summer house? Could we use it for our trip?”

“Summer house? You’re right, it has been a while since we went there...” Kazuya looked up at the ceiling, as if trying to remember.

“We went there a lot when I was little,” Aiko said. She remembered a house in the mountains somewhere. A lonely, Western-style house surrounded by nature.

A memory sprang up unbidden in the back of Aiko’s mind. She and Kyoya were together in a room in that house. The room was in shambles. There were scores

cut into the walls, the furniture was in pieces. Someone who looked like a servant girl lay on the floor, bleeding...

Kyoya, still a child, was injured, and staring at Aiko in fear...

Aiko's own small hands were covered in blood. And then...

"Aiko!" Kazuya barked, snapping Aiko back to reality.

His voice turned gentle again as he continued. "That house was falling apart. We had it torn down. We have other summer houses, so please pick one of those."

"Oh, really? Do we have one near the beach?"

"Yes, I know just the place. We can talk about it over dinner."

Kazuya checked his watch — it was just about dinnertime — then led Aiko into the dining room.

Aiko's brief flash of memory vanished immediately back into the fog.

*****

Yuichi and Yoriko were on the way home after dropping Aiko off. The sun was sinking below the horizon. In Japanese tradition, this was considered the time of day when disaster was most likely to strike.

"Eeeeeek!"

Yoriko's slightly theatrical shriek sounded out in the middle of a quiet neighborhood.

She grabbed on to Yuichi, who lifted her up and stepped to the side. As a man dashed through the place he had been just a moment ago, Yuichi stuck out a leg, sending the man toppling to the ground.

He was dressed in a parka with the hood covering his face — a strange thing to wear in this hot weather, even if it was just to conceal his identity.

Yuichi had noticed someone following them ever since they had arrived at Aiko's house. But he still wasn't expecting them to attack him in the city, even if there was no one else around. A surprisingly bold move.

"Hold me tight..." Yoriko whispered, blissfully.

“You could have really easily dodged that, you know,” Yuichi said, baffled as to why she’d chosen to cling to him. She really hadn’t needed his help.

“Good job, Mr. Pervert. You have my compliments,” Yoriko said to the man as he picked himself up off the ground.

Yuichi peeled Yoriko off of him.

“Who are you?” he asked. He couldn’t begin to imagine who could be attacking them now. He had taken out almost every organization that was hostile to the Sakaki household. No one else would be stupid enough to raise a hand against them.

The man in the parka didn’t answer.

Above his head were the words “Vampire II.”

That offered a hint. He had beaten the Vampire?s in the abandoned clinic before, so maybe it was someone connected to them. Now that he thought about it, the Vampire?s had been wearing parkas to hide their faces, too.

Could they have something to do with Noro? Yuichi thought. As he did, Yoriko stepped out ahead of him, a socket wrench in her hand.

“Hey, Yori...” Yuichi began.

Yoriko had a laid-back personality in general, but she lost her temper very easily. There was no helping Mutsuko, of course, but he wished his little sister could be a bit more ladylike.

Yoriko carried a number of handyman tools around for self-defense. It seemed out of all of them, she treasured the socket wrench most of all, for its ease of use.

“He looks like a pervert. Maybe we should beat him up and take him to the police,” she said.

“Didn’t I tell you it’s better to run away than fight?” Yuichi protested. No matter how confident you were in your ability, the best thing to do in a fight was to avoid it. That was the first rule of self-defense.

“But if we let this scumlord go, he’ll just get cocky... We need to teach him that the world doesn’t take kindly to his type. Society abhors a pervert.”

“Fine. Leave this to me, then,” Yuichi said. If it were just some ruffian, he’d have no problem letting Yoriko handle it. But this was a vampire they were dealing with. They had to be careful.

“Oh! That’s right. It’s way better if I get you to protect me.” Yoriko clapped her hands together. She seemed to be getting some strange enjoyment out of this.

“Okay, look. It would save us all a lot of trouble right now if you’d just get lost,” Yuichi said as he turned back to the man in the parka. But the man didn’t seem to have any intention of leaving. “The main thing I hate is not knowing why stuff like this is happening. So just tell me why you’re doing it, okay? Then we can fight all you want.”

“It’s a stroke of bad luck that you had a girl with you,” the man intoned, his voice low and eerie. “Now, restrain that man!”

His eyes glittered in a manner not of this world. Yuichi fell into a defensive stance, getting ready for anything.

The two of them glared at each other, locked into their positions. Moments passed.

Yuichi waited. Nothing happened.

“What’s he talking about?” Yoriko asked, cutting through the silence as if she was watching the stupidest thing ever. “And look at what he’s wearing, at this time of year. You think he’s crazy or something?”

Yuichi was at a loss. The man wasn’t coming after him, and he didn’t seem threatening enough to justify Yuichi charging him.

“Why isn’t my charm working?!” the man yelled, glaring at Yoriko.

“I’ll forget the way you tried to sucker punch me, so why don’t we call this off?” Yuichi asked.

This man was a slightly off-kilter vampire, perhaps. Maybe he’d be better off just avoiding him. But before Yuichi could finish that thought, the man thrust his hands forward and charged again.

It was an incomprehensible course of action to Yuichi. He was probably intending to grab onto him with both hands, but that kind of posture limited

your options after the grab. He must have been a total novice.

Maybe he wants to bite me? Yuichi thought, grasping for meaning in the vampire's random attack.

Maybe he thought that as long as he bit him, he could work something out.

Yuichi just grabbed the man's hand, twisted it to the side, then wrapped it around behind him, putting pressure on the joint. He thought for a moment, then swept his leg to throw him back to the ground, where he used a pressure against his wrist to hold him in place.

Yoriko immediately stomped her foot on the back of the man's head.

"Hey!" Yuichi shouted.

"Sorry, but I'm feeling really humiliated right now," Yoriko said.

"Be careful! He's pretty strong!"

The man reached out for her, but Yoriko dodged his hand easily and kicked him in the face.

"Yori, I was hoping to de-escalate the situation..."

"Nuh-uh. I'm gonna make this guy pay," Yoriko said, kicking him in the face again and again.

"I beg your pardon, but would you mind leaving it at that?"

The sound of the unfamiliar voice caused Yuichi to turn.

"Vampire III." Another vampire was standing behind him.

She was a beautiful woman with a slightly foreign air about her, wearing a red dress that revealed a shocking amount of cleavage. Her hair was a cascade of gentle curls.

The woman looked at them with a haughty air, as if she were fully aware of her own beauty.

Yuichi found her appearance strangely out of place. This wasn't a woman who should be breaking up a fight in the middle of a residential district.

"As you can see, he's a bit of a silly boy," the woman said. "I'll give him a good

talking to. Is that all right?”

Yuichi could feel no hostility from the woman.

“Yori, lay off, okay?” He took Yoriko’s hand and pulled her off the fallen man.

As the woman passed him, he picked up the faint aroma of perfume. She offered the man in the parka a hand to help him back up.

“Goodbye,” she said, and led the man off.

“Hey, who was that woman?” Yoriko asked, sounding rather miffed for some reason.

“I don’t know,” Yuichi said. The appearance of vampires other than Aiko was a deeply unsettling thought.

Chapter 5: Let's Visit the Noro Residence

Kyoya was enraged.

He brought an arm down hard enough to split his bed down the middle.

The bookshelf was in bad shape, too. Kyoya's rampage had left it in pieces.

He was strong enough to do that, and fast, too. That man shouldn't have been able to beat him. He had dominated that entire group of delinquents, yet they had been completely helpless before that man. That friend of Aiko's...

He had been just about to grab the man when he had suddenly tumbled to the ground. He couldn't even remember what the man had done to him.

Somehow, that man had taken out all of his slaves.

The sharing of sensation was a vampiric ability that Kyoya had only recently mastered. He could suck someone's blood and experience what they experienced. He had seen firsthand, through the eyes of his slaves, that man taking out all of them in the abandoned hospital.

Those slaves were now useless to him. The injuries weren't that bad, but they weren't going to be able to fight that man after he had demonstrated such overwhelming power.

"Damn you!" Kyoya shouted. The one-sided defeat burned in his mind.

Eriko had taken Kyoya back to the house following his failure, then left him to take out his anger on his room. Before long, midnight had fallen.

"How long are you going to stay at that?" Eriko asked as she returned. She was carrying a coffin over her shoulders.

"I heard that sleeping in a coffin can increase your powers even more," she added. With a grunt of effort, she deposited the coffin on the floor.

"What happened? Why didn't my charm work?" Kyoya snapped at Eriko.

"Charm" was another vampiric power that Kyoya had awakened. It let him

hypnotize a member of the other sex into becoming his slave. It wasn't a lasting domination like sucking blood might be, but it should have been enough for him to take the upper hand in that fight.

Kyoya had tried to charm the girl with that man. He was sure it had activated, but the effect had never manifested.

"It clearly isn't foolproof." Eriko sat down on the broken bed and took a notebook out of her bag. She hadn't told Kyoya where she'd gotten it, but it seemed to contain secrets about vampires not known by the wider world.

At least, that was what she had said. Kyoya had never seen what was in it himself.

"Ah," she said. "It says it doesn't work on religious fanatics, so you shouldn't rely on it too much."

You couldn't know who was a fanatic just by looking at them, so caution would be the order of the day. Kyoya had learned that in the most painful way possible.

"By the way, why did you attack that boy?" she asked. "It seemed quite an imprudent action."

Because he had defeated all his servants. Because he wanted to suck the blood of the girl who was with him. A number of reasons floated up in Kyoya's mind, but he chose to keep them to himself.

"Well, if you don't want to tell me, that's just fine," Eriko continued. "But be careful in the future. I hear there are some vampire hunters around."

"I have no intention of skulking around in the shadows!" Kyoya snapped. But he also realized that indiscriminately attacking people would cause trouble in the long run. "Targeting a specific community seems like a fine enough idea, but those hoodlums seem rather hard to keep under control, don't they?"

Kyoya had enslaved a group of gang bosses by sucking their blood, assuming that through them, he could take control of their organization. But the underlings in the abandoned hospital had kidnapped that girl on their own accord to try to suck her blood. In other words, those whose blood his generals drank — his "grandchildren" — were not under Kyoya's control. It could be a sign of Kyoya's own weakness, or a fixed limitation on the ability itself.

“I won’t use them anymore... but by coincidence, it did bear some fruit,” he said. “Those anthromorphs.” Some of those that Kyoya had drunk blood from had turned out to have the ability to turn into half-animal creatures, who had proved stronger than his other half-vampiric slaves.

“Oh, those. There’s something about that, too... retainers, I believe they’re called. It seems there are ghouls, witches, and werewolves. Some people have that potential inside them, but they aren’t always aware of it. I wonder how rare they are...” Eriko said as she flipped through the pages.

“They’ll be useful in my army,” Kyoya said.

“There doesn’t seem to be any way to pick them out of a crowd, so you’ll be reliant on luck, though,” Eriko commented. “So? What comes next?”

“I think I’ll take over my school first.” The school was the closest sealed environment Kyoya knew of. If he got the teachers under his control, the students would soon follow.

“Is this a side effect? It affects not just the body, but the mind, as well?” Eriko spoke mockingly.

“Effects on the mind?” Kyoya asked. “I guess there have been. But I think this is just the real me showing itself.”

Drinking blood had definitely affected his mind. He no longer had any scruples about attacking people. The ecstasy of exerting his will on others was a drug he couldn’t get enough of. More than anything, he no longer hesitated in indulging in his own desires. That was the reason he had attacked that man, too.

“The school, then... very well. Speaking of which... world domination, was it? I don’t intend to go with you that far.”

Kyoya couldn’t blame her; it must have sounded like big talk. He hadn’t actually accomplished anything yet.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “If I can get the school in my grasp, I’m sure I can use it to some kind of end.”

“So it’s practice?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, do as you wish. Oh, that’s right. Make sure you count how many whose blood you’ve drank. It’s important to keep a handle on your slaves.” With that, Eriko stood up and left the room with a casual wave of her hand.

Now alone, Kyoya walked up to the window and gazed outside.

The forest stretched out beneath him. The forest that made up the Noro family’s land had sunk into darkness, without a single point of light to illuminate it.

In it, Kyoya visualized his own empire of darkness.

*****

It was a shrine to Susano-o Mikoto.

Mutsuko hadn’t know that when she’d chosen it for its size and proximity to their house, but she had been delighted by the coincidence.

Sharp noises rang out around the back of that shrine: the sound of Yuichi’s punches ripping through the air, over and over again.

It was four o’clock in the morning. It was still dark out. Yuichi was dressed in a track suit, going through his martial arts lessons.

The practice was simple. Strike out with the right arm while stepping forward with the right leg. Bring the arm and leg back, do the same with the left.

Repeating that motion over and over again carried him slowly forward, and after a certain distance, he turned, and did the same in the other direction.

Originally, he had practiced on the lawn at their house, but over the course of years, the stamping had beaten the ground down so hard that no grass would grow in it.

His family lived in an imported house, with a stylish design that his mother had chosen. As one might expect, then, she was quite fastidious about the appearance of the lawn and the exterior.

His usually easygoing mother had fallen into a deep sorrow when she had learned that their lawn was now barren. They had quickly worked to dig it up, change the dirt, and replenish the grass, but the normally willful Mutsuko had felt a rare sense of remorse about what she had done. Thus, they no longer

trained at home.

Instead, Mutsuko went looking for large, isolated spaces nearby to run his training regimen, and they changed the location periodically to keep a repeat of that incident from happening.

Yuichi and Mutsuko were currently the only ones at the shrine. Mutsuko was in a track suit as well, sitting on a rucksack that converted into a chair and watching Yuichi's movements.

If she saw any issues, she'd point them out, but lately she hadn't needed to. It was mostly up to Yuichi to pay attention to how his body felt.

"Hey. Hey!" Mutsuko spoke up, clearly bored with just sitting.

"What?" Yuichi replied as his fist ripped through the air.

"I hear the shrine owner has a daughter! I wonder if she's a miko!"

"A miko? I don't see any reason why she would be just because she's the owner's daughter." It seemed an extremely shallow thought to Yuichi.

"Oh? I think they usually hire family to be miko. Well, I guess sometimes they recruit from the employment office, too."

"Why would anyone recruit a miko from an employment office?" Yuichi asked, focusing fervently on how little he cared.

"Maybe she's secretly watching you practice, waiting to bring you some provisions!"

"I really hope not!" He was doing this in secret because he didn't like people watching him. He didn't like the thought of anyone finding him.

Yuichi looked out over the quiet forest behind the shrine. It was full of dead trees. This, too, was the result of Yuichi's overzealous practice, a type of training where you went around striking a tree, pretending it was an opponent. Many of them had gone barren as a result.

"Ah, look, someone's there!" Mutsuko said, pointing to the forest.

"What?" Yuichi quickly stopped training and looked in the direction Mutsuko was pointing. Someone was definitely approaching from out of the twilight

forest.

Yuichi's first instinct was to run, but he stopped as he recognized the face. "Oh, it's just you. Don't scare me like that."

Indeed, it was Natsuki Takeuchi. She was wearing a skintight black leotard. It was certainly a provocative mode of dress, but to Yuichi, who knew she was a serial killer, it was equally evocative of an assassin's garb.

LOVE INTEREST II

“Hey, can’t you do something about that outfit?” he asked. “I know it’s probably easy to move in, but...”

Natsuki came around from time to time to join Yuichi in his training, and this was what she usually wore. It hugged her body lines so tightly that Yuichi had a hard time knowing where to look.

“What’s the big deal? She looks like Orin the Fugitive! It’s cool!” As usual, Mutsuko’s examples didn’t make things any clearer to Yuichi.

“If it distracts you, Sakaki, then it’s all the more to my advantage,” Natsuki said. It seemed she was wearing it specifically for Yuichi’s benefit. “Now, shall we fight?” she added, cutting quickly to the chase.

“Sure, but show a little mercy, okay?”

“I can’t. I fight on killing instinct alone.” Immediately, Natsuki leaped at him, extending her fingers to aim straight for his eyes.

There was not an ounce of hesitation in her movements. She was moving so fast that if her fingers struck his eyes, they would pierce right through to his brain.

Most people would hurt themselves trying to attack the eyes like that, but Natsuki wasn’t most people.

Fortunately for Yuichi, he could see the attack coming a mile away. He brushed her arm aside with his own to throw the attack off target, then got around beside her with a diagonal step, and struck lightly with his palm at her exposed side.

Natsuki, annoyed, began a rapid flurry of attacks, but Yuichi dodged each one. He could easily predict Natsuki’s instinctive attack patterns by now, and keep her at bay even without furukami. She was far too telegraphed in her movements.

After a bit of similar back-and-forth, Natsuki collapsed on the ground. Her expression was one of perfect satisfaction, suggesting she had gotten whatever she needed from the combat.

It seemed that being able to move with killing intent was enough to sate Natsuki’s murderous urges. So as long as there was someone who could really

dodge her blows, she could do without the kill itself. And right now, Yuichi was the only one who fit the bill.

“This is a pretty basic thing, but you should really stop fighting with your body lines exposed,” he told her. “It makes it really clear how your muscles are moving. You know why people wear hakama in Japanese martial arts? It’s there to mask their movements.”

“I see. You’re running your eyes all over my body, are you?” Natsuki, on the ground, hugged herself as if to hide her chest. It was a bit of a theatrical gesture.

“Hey, don’t put it that way. You said it yourself: you can’t fight someone if you don’t look at them. It’s communication, right?” Yuichi decided to lay off the advice, though. He really didn’t want her to get any better at fighting.

It was Friday after class, six days after Yuichi’s shopping trip with Aiko. He came to the survival club room to find the usual members already assembled.

“Okay! Regarding our subject from last week, the summer training camp... Any new thoughts?” Mutsuko proclaimed in her usual bold tones, standing in front of the whiteboard.

Their provision that money was no object hadn’t given Yuichi any new ideas. While he remained silent, Aiko raised her hand and gave the first suggestion.

“Um, we have a summer house near the beach. Could we go there?” Aiko turned to face Yuichi. “It’s okay if it’s just using a summer house, right?”

He figured she was asking him because he was the one who had objected to using her family’s money for the trip.

“If it’s something you already have, I guess it’s okay to use it,” he said. It still felt like relying on her family’s wealth, but it was different from just having her pay for everything.

“I like it!” Mutsuko said gaily. “Going to a wealthy friend’s summer house is such a trope!”

Yuichi had no idea what sort of trope she was talking about.

Mutsuko wrote “Noro’s summer house” on the whiteboard, which still

contained the other suggestions from last time.

“The Unmarked Land,” Natsuki whispered. Another strange location. “A region outside the jurisdiction of Japanese law. A city of inhuman monsters, where you must keep your wits about you at all times.”

“You can do that one without me!” Yuichi objected forcefully. There was no way he was going to a place like that.

“Is this different from the junkyard you mentioned before?” Mutsuko asked with intense curiosity.

“The Unmarked Land is out in the Pacific Ocean. It’s pretty far away, so it might be hard to get there. You might need to charter a helicopter.”

“I see. So we’d need the money for that, huh?” Mutsuko nodded and wrote “the Unmarked Land” on the whiteboard. “What about you, Orihara? Have you found us a way to get to an isekai?”

“What? Are we seriously discussing the isekai thing?” Yuichi asked Mutsuko, just to be sure. The idea of offering up an isekai for a training camp discussion just seemed bizarre.

“We spend a lot of time talking about isekai, so we really should visit one sometime!” she said cheerfully.

“You make it sound as easy as visiting a public bath!” Yuichi was growing more and more uneasy. He was starting to believe they really did exist.

“Um, what about the Mayoiga?” Kanako asked.

The Mayoiga — in other words, the House of the Lost — was a legendary house hidden in the mountains that was said to appear before lost travelers and bring them riches. You could never visit it twice, so some people thought it existed in an isekai. That must be why Kanako was bringing it up.

“I get it! That’s like an isekai! The Tono area, then?” Mutsuko fell easily into the idea.

Yuichi had a bad feeling about this. Tono was a region in northern Japan with a strong tie to folklore. It seemed a likely place for oni, as well as kappa, tengu, zashiki-warashi, and other forms of mischief.

“Well, I think that’s enough candidates,” Mutsuko said. “We have until summer vacation to decide. So if anyone has any more ideas, let me know!”

The candidates for their training camp filled Yuichi with nothing but anxiety.

“Setting that aside, I think it’s time we started up our normal activities.” As she spoke, Mutsuko wrote on the whiteboard: “Isekai Survival Discussion 4: Psychological Resistance to Killing in an Isekai War.”

It was part of a series.

The second discussion had been “A Developmental Psychology Approach to Learning Isekai Languages”; the third had been “NAISEI: The Strengths and Weaknesses of Crop Rotation.” Yuichi had forgotten most of what they entailed.

Incidentally, NAISEI was a term mocking the use of anachronistically modern knowledge of governance in isekai portal fantasy stories.

“Now, today’s ‘what do I do if I end up in an isekai’ is about war!”

“Now that you mention it, isekai don’t tend to be very peaceful places, do they?” Yuichi thought back on many different isekai fantasy stories he had read. They always had some kind of fighting in them.

“We tend to think of isekai as being less civilized than modern Japan, with a high mortality rate!” Mutsuko said.

“That’s right. I spend a lot of time worried about what I would do if I ended up in a world like that...” Kanako said worriedly.

“You spend a lot of time worried about *that*?” Yuichi asked. It seemed like a strange thing to spend your time thinking about.

“Yes!” Kanako responded earnestly. “You never know when a portal to an isekai might open!”

She really believed in this stuff, apparently.

“Anyway, it’s possible that an isekai will be rampant with magical creatures and dangerous life forms, but the most dangerous predator is man, right? If you’re in the middle of a war zone, or thrown out onto a battlefield... what would you do, Noro? Could you kill someone?”

“Huh? Me? Probably not...” Aiko said after some thought.

“What if it’s kill-or-be-killed? They’re isekai people. They have nothing to do with you, right?”

“Even so... I don’t think I could.”

“That’s right. That’s probably the answer most people would give!” Mutsuko had likely asked Aiko because she would give the answer she was looking for. If she had asked Natsuki, things would have gotten a bit more complicated. “I think this is rather well-known, but you may not have heard it, so I’ll explain it! The question is: can people kill other people?”

“Well, people kill people all the time,” Yuichi said. “The news is full of stories about wars all over the world, and individual murders, too.”

“Those are exceptions. Well, I guess it happens too often to just call them exceptions, but... For now, let’s take ‘people can’t kill other people’ as our conclusion, and work backwards.”

“Is that really true?” Aiko asked doubtfully.

Yuichi felt the same way.

“Let’s start with this. The discharge rate of firearms from the American army during World War II was between 15 and 20%. Most people couldn’t fire, even when there was an enemy soldier in front of them, which suggests a strong resistance to the idea of killing another human being. They say that even under orders, most soldiers intentionally missed.

“When we think about war, we usually think about soldiers in a berserker frenzy, bloodily tearing through other soldiers, but the truth isn’t really like that. In other words, humans have an instinctive resistance to killing each other. This is something we’re proud of! It’s why we use the word ‘inhumane’ to describe serial killers! We’re saying people who kill people aren’t really human. They’re basically monsters.”

“I agree that it’s something to be proud of, but that’s not very convincing coming from you, Sis!” Yuichi snapped. Given the savage things she tended to spend her time thinking about, and the dangerous ideas she came up with, he couldn’t help but question her talk about the human resistance to killing.

Yuichi cast a glance at Natsuki beside him. She was looking pretty despondent.

“Takeuchi?” Yuichi asked, worried. It wasn’t as if she had chosen to be a slave to her killing urge, after all.

“I’m okay. Don’t worry,” Natsuki responded, though her voice was unusually monotone.

“And if you think that’s just because we were more culturally sophisticated by World War II, well, it’s believed to have been the same in ancient times. The casualties in hand-to-hand combat back then were a lot lower than you’d expect.”

“Tons of people died during Japan’s Warring States period, though,” Yuichi offered, thinking back on scenes from the countless period dramas he’d watched. Movies weren’t shy about showing people killing each other during war.

“You probably think so because of the flashy portrayals in fiction. But most of the people who fought back then were farmers. You think they were going to start killing people just because they were dragged onto a battlefield? The key back then was mainly to get a lot of people together and shout out, ‘Hey, you can’t beat us! Surrender already!’ and make a big show of fighting so that they think you’re going to kill them so they say, ‘Oh, we lose!’ If you can secure victory quickly, no one has to kill each other needlessly.”

Mutsuko said this as if she’d seen it firsthand.

“People back then weren’t too different from people today, psychologically speaking. It’s not easy to kill just because someone tells you to. So if you’re in an isekai where there’s a war going on, don’t you think the same would apply? Let’s move on with that assumption in place!”

Yuichi had always assumed that people in the old days had had no problems killing other people. But maybe that idea was rooted in bias.

“Okay, now here’s the issue. If people can’t kill people, it makes it hard to wage a war, right? This is important to know if you want to use modern day knowledge to cheat! The question is: how do you create humans who can kill other humans? This is a fundamental of combat more important than tactics or strategy.”

Mutsuko sounded truly gleeful as she spoke.

“There’s a lot of examples about how to do this, but let’s use the American army as an example. They knew you couldn’t win a war if your soldiers wouldn’t fight, so they did a lot of research on this. This research got the firing rate of soldiers in the Vietnam War up to 90%.”

Ninety percent? That was a huge increase from the twenty percent figure she had mentioned before, Yuichi thought.

“They used psychological conditioning. It’s a little too complex to go into detail, so let’s use a relatively easy-to-understand example: practice shooting human-like targets. In the past, gun range targets had been just the unmoving round kind, but they turned the targets into realistic humanoid ones and had the soldiers practice firing at them as they jumped at them. They’d dress balloons in combat uniforms, or fill them with red paint so they would burst with ‘blood’ when shot. Eventually, that got the soldiers to instinctively shoot other humans, and after enough time passed, they began to see the enemy as nothing more than targets. They convinced themselves it was targets they were shooting, not other people.”

“Um... still, that all seems a little absurd...” Aiko was scowling. It wasn’t exactly a pleasant thing to hear about.

“That’s right. No matter how much training or justification you give them, you can’t completely remove a person’s resistance to killing! That’s why they conditioned the soldiers in the Vietnam War to kill people that way, but it meant a lot of them came home traumatized... Oh hey, what’s wrong with Takeuchi?”

Natsuki had collapsed on the table.

“Look... you know? Just try to be more considerate,” Yuichi said.

It was hard to tell where Natsuki stood on the question of killing, but it was clear to Yuichi that she wasn’t completely indifferent to it.

He left the room with Aiko.

Mutsuko and Kanako were staying behind to discuss the latter’s novel, and Natsuki had excused herself to go home after a little rest.

Yuichi and Aiko walked side by side between the gym and the athletics field.

It was late in the day, but the summer sunlight was still streaming down hard enough to burn. Even Yuichi found it a little harsh.

Worried, he looked over at Aiko. She was walking beside him without a care in the world. She seemed totally fine, despite her vampiric nature.

Through the fence, he could see the sports clubs practicing on the athletic field. He'd assumed they would be getting more serious in anticipation for summer vacation, but the silhouettes there seemed sporadic and listless. Yuichi was just thinking it was a bit strange when Aiko spoke up.

"Takeuchi said she wanted normal friends, so I wonder if she's self-conscious about not being normal herself..."

"I dunno," Yuichi said. It was hard to get into the mind of a serial killer, but the talk of killing today seemed to have upset her.

She had been pacified, but she was still a killer, and he still wasn't sure what that meant. He had reluctantly allowed her into the club, but he still didn't really know how to act around her.

"Hey, are you okay for sunburn?" Yuichi asked. The talk of Natsuki was getting awkward, so he'd decided to change the subject.

"Yeah," Aiko said. "I don't usually worry about it, but I still never get burned."

"That's convenient," Yuichi commented.

"You don't think a little tan would look more wholesome?" Aiko asked.

"I think you look better with fair skin, myself."

"R-Really?" Aiko beamed.

"By the way, what's going on with your brother? Is he still talking about crazy stuff?" Yuichi had agreed to let Aiko confide in him about her brother in exchange for Yuichi confiding in her about his Soul Reader, and he occasionally remembered and asked her about it. He assumed she would say it was more of the same, but instead, her expression clouded over.

After hanging her head for a moment, she raised it again. "Hey... do you want

to come by my house?”

“How come?” Yuichi asked.

“I want to talk to you about my brother.”

“Sure,” Yuichi agreed readily.

“I’ll just call home and let them know,” Aiko said.

With that, they both headed for Aiko’s house.

Their neighbors referred to it as “the nature park,” since from the outside, it looked like a forest surrounded by a fence.

The grounds were huge and the mansion sat at the center, which made it hard to see from the outside, and this naturally led to the assumption that it was a park.

“Whew... it’s kind of incredible,” Yuichi said. Even after they were inside the fence, it still looked like a forest. The shrill chorus of the cicadas was deafening around them.

“Sorry...” Aiko said.

“What are you apologizing for?” Yuichi asked.

“Well, it’s a little embarrassing...” Aiko said, shrinking a bit.

They walked down the sun-dappled path. It felt so much like a stroll through the woods that he nearly forgot they were heading for Aiko’s house.

“It’s nice to have all this greenery, isn’t it?” he asked.

“There’s too much, though... I hear people think we’re a park...” Aiko murmured.

Yuichi looked around. He saw a pond, large rocks, and what looked like a cave. It really was too large to be a proper lawn. “Do you ever get lost?”

“It’s okay as long as you follow the paths. We also have security cameras set up all over, so if you do get lost, you can be found quickly.”

“I bet Mutsuko would love this,” Yuichi murmured. It seemed like a good place for survival training.

After walking for a while, they finally came upon a run-down Western-style estate. It was only three stories tall, but it made up for that with length.

“Sorry to repeat myself, but it really is incredible,” he said.

“Do you think it looks haunted too, Sakaki?” Aiko asked nervously, turning her eyes up at him.

“Huh?” he asked. “I think it’s cool. You don’t see many buildings like this in Japan.”

“Yeah. It was moved here from overseas, they say, a long time ago.” Aiko seemed happier now. Yuichi decided not to mention that it seemed like the kind of house that would play host to a murder mystery.

“But I guess it’s only natural that people think it’s a haunted house,” Aiko continued. “Everyone who lives in it is a vampire.”

As they approached the building, the door opened.

“Automatic doors?” Yuichi asked. It wouldn’t be surprising, with a mansion this size.

“No, no. See? There’s a camera over there. They see me coming home, and they open it for me.”

“So effectively an automatic door...” Yuichi said, dumbfounded. The thought processes of rich people were beyond him.

“Welcome home, my lady.” A servant in a maid’s outfit bowed to Aiko. Her uniform was classic and understated, but the beauty of the person wearing it made it seem fancier than it was. She seemed in her early twenties, with a placid air about her. Above her head was the label “Vampire IV.”

As Aiko had said before, the servants were all vampires.

“Thanks, Akiko,” Aiko said. “I mentioned on the phone that you didn’t have to go to any trouble or anything...”

“We are not going to any trouble, so I do not know what you—”

“Is this Yuichi Sakaki?!” An enormous voice boomed out from further in the house. Yuichi peeked past the maid.

An enormous man in a white coat stood in the spacious entryway hall, his legs planted at shoulder width and arms folded.

“Dad!” Aiko cried out in surprise.

Apparently, he was Aiko’s father. Kazuya Noro.

Aiko had told Yuichi that he was the director of Noro General Hospital, but why was the man suddenly glaring at him? He couldn’t understand it. He had never met the man before.

Above the man’s head was the label “Super Doctor.”

What, not “Vampire”?

If everyone in the house was a vampire, did that mean that this man was both a vampire *and* a super doctor?

“A pleasure to meet you. I’m Yuichi Sakaki.” Yuichi hurried to give him a proper greeting. As intimidating as he was, this man was still the master of the house. He didn’t want to give offense.

“Hmph. I am Aiko’s father.” Kazuya returned the greeting standoffishly as he continued to size Yuichi up with his glance.

“Hey, Dad? You’re being really rude!” Aiko exclaimed.

“Huh? Oh, um, well...” Kazuya apparently hadn’t expected his daughter to be angry, as he quickly changed his attitude. “Fine, then. Sakaki, is it? Come here a minute.”

“Hang on! What are you gonna do?” Aiko cried.

“Don’t ask, just come.” Kazuya headed for the corner of the entrance hall, and Yuichi and Aiko followed.

There was a round table with a vase of live flowers on it, but Kazuya swept the vase off the table.

“What are you doing, Dad?!”

“It’s in the way!” Kazuya rolled up his sleeve, revealing an arm like a tree trunk with visible veins. He placed his elbow on the table. “Sakaki, the rule is that no one may enter this house until they beat me in arm wrestling.”

“We’ve never had that rule before!” Aiko shouted.

The abrupt arm wrestling challenge so confused Yuichi that he didn’t know how to respond at first.

“My lady, the head of the house makes the rules,” Akiko said smoothly. “If that is what he says, that is what will happen. In this moment, it is decided.”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Aiko’s father said. “Not to brag, but I am known as a super doctor. A broken bone, a compound fracture or two... it’s nothing I can’t treat.” He opened and closed his hand. The fingers were thick and exuded power.

“This is so stupid! Let’s go, Sakaki,” Aiko said furiously.

“Running away? Then don’t think you’ll ever cross this house’s threshold again!” Kazuya barked out suddenly.

“Oh, come on! Dad, what are you so mad about?” Aiko cried.

Yuichi was a bit flabbergasted, but he grasped what was going on. Which meant there was only one thing to do. Yuichi walked up to the table. gripped the edge with his left hand, and put his right elbow on top of it.

“Sakaki! You don’t have to play along with him!”

“It’s okay. It’s just arm wrestling. And if I win, he’ll let me in, right?” Yuichi answered.

“I’ll even go you one better,” Kazuya confirmed. “If I smash your arm or cause an open fracture, and you can still flirt with Aiko in that condition, you still pass!”

“We’re not flirting... Okay, Noro. You give the signal.” Yuichi gripped Kazuya’s hand.

“Huh? ...Fine, whatever! Start!” Aiko threw down her hand to start the match.

“Rarrrgh!” As Aiko gave the signal, Kazuya let out a bellowing cry. His arm swelled even larger, ropy muscles bulging to the surface. He was putting all his power into it, trying to break Yuichi’s arm. His face turned red, and he gritted his teeth so hard he could crush rocks between them.

“How desperate are you?!” Aiko cried out in shock.

Everyone must have assumed the match would be over in an instant, but seconds passed, and neither man's arm moved from their starting positions. Yuichi was holding his own against Kazuya's strength.

"What?!" Kazuya shouted.

"Sorry, but I intend to win," Yuichi said calmly. He was very competitive. Once challenged, there was no way he would back down.

Yuichi brought all his strength to bear. Kazuya's arm began to tremble and give way.

But Kazuya was equally determined. He dug down deeper and pushed back, letting their power be equally matched once more. "Who the hell are you? How do you have so much strength in those scrawny arms?"

"Dad! You can't say that to a guest!" Aiko exclaimed.

"Graaaaaaaaaah!" Kazuya screamed.

Just like that, it was over, as the table broke in half with a crash.

Yuichi and Kazuya glared at each other, still locked in their grip.

"Shall we call it a draw?" Yuichi asked, keeping his eyes daringly locked on Kazuya's.

"Time for round two, the boxing match! Now you'll see my true—"

There was a light smacking sound. Aiko had punched Kazuya in the arm. It couldn't have hurt him much, but it gave Kazuya pause.

"Dad, you jerk! I hate you!" There were tears in Aiko's eyes.

"Ah, well, Aiko, I just wanted to test the man in your life. A boy needs to be strong, to protect his girl..."

Smack. She hit him again.

"Dad, you dummy!" With that as her last word, Aiko ran off crying.

The two men were left behind, still holding hands, while the maid in the old-fashioned uniform watched placidly.

"I guess of the two, 'dummy' would hurt more..." Yuichi murmured, hoping the

triviality might break the silence.

“Yeah...” But all Kazuya could do was sigh in response.

“Can I go after her?” Yuichi asked.

Kazuya looked at him uncomfortably. Aiko’s rage seemed to have pacified him. “...Please.”

Kazuya released his hand, and Yuichi did the same.

Dejection was written clearly over Kazuya’s face. He clearly couldn’t stand seeing Aiko cry. “She probably went to her room. It’s at the end of the hall on the second floor. She never listens to me when she gets like this...”

“If you want to know if I can protect her, don’t worry. I will. And since there seems to be some misunderstanding here, you should probably know that Noro and I aren’t dating.”

“Really?” Kazuya’s eyes opened wide and he stepped toward Yuichi.

“I just came here to talk about her brother.” Cowed by Kazuya’s advance, Yuichi took a step back.

“I see... But listen to me! You’d better not do anything to break Aiko’s heart and disgrace her!”

“I would never even think of it,” Yuichi assured him.

“Never, you say? You bastard! Are you saying my Aiko is unattractive?” Kazuya exclaimed.

What a difficult person... Yuichi sighed and opted not to respond.

“Well, I’m off,” he said, then climbed the stairs and headed to the back room on the second floor.

He found Aiko’s room right away. It had her nameplate on the door.

“It’s me. Let me in,” Yuichi called out as he knocked.

After a while, the door opened. Aiko looked at him, her eyes red and moist. “Sakaki... I’m sorry. My father was so rude to you...”

“Don’t cry. It didn’t bother me.” Yuichi found that the sight of Aiko in tears

unsettled him. It gave him an uneasy feeling in his chest.

“Sorry I ran off...” she mumbled.

“It’s okay. Anyway, your dad gave me permission to come in, so don’t sweat it.”

“Yeah... Anyway, don’t just stand out there. Come in.” Aiko seemed to be feeling a little better as Yuichi stepped inside.

Her room was the polar opposite of Mutsuko’s room: pristine and feminine, with white and pink coloring. There was a row of stuffed animals against the wall.

It feels like a girl’s room... Yuichi took a seat on the sofa.

“Oh, I’ll bring you something to drink.” Aiko said as she walked out.

Yuichi began to feel restless. *I’ve heard that pink is a soothing color, but...*

Maybe it was because it was his first time being in a girl’s room other than his big sister’s. Yuichi had assumed that living with his sisters all this time had gotten him used to girls, but maybe being around a girl who was his classmate was different.

Eventually, Aiko returned with a tray with some cold tea, and placed it on the table.

“Hey, don’t you have a maid?” Yuichi asked. “She seemed like the ‘at your service’ type...”

“Yeah, but she’s not there for us kids. We were raised to do things for ourselves. And don’t get any funny ideas; all the servants are old ladies. The young, pretty maid thing is just an illusion.”

“Huh? Even the girl at the front door?” The maid Akiko who met him at the door certainly seemed young...

“Akiko is over fifty years old. Oh, and everyone in the house, servants included, are vampires.”

Fifty years old, she had said, giving the word special emphasis. He had heard that vampires were unaging, and to look that young at fifty certainly suggested

she wasn't human.

"Whew... I don't know if it's the money thing or the vampire thing, but it definitely feels like we live in different worlds... Hey, I've been wondering. If you're so rich, why don't you go to a private school?" Yuichi asked her.

"That's part of our upbringing, too," Aiko said. "We're supposed to go to public school."

"That reminds me," Yuichi said. "I thought it was weird that Konishi comes to our school, too. You think it's the same for her?"

"Konishi? Good point... If she's as rich as she says she is, you'd think she'd be attending a charm school or something."

Yuri Konishi. In her introduction on the first day of school, she had gained the attention of the class by saying she was from a wealthy family and that she was above commoners like them. But Yuichi's attention had been on the "Anthromorph" label above her head.

"Now that you mention it, I feel like I've met Konishi somewhere before," Aiko said.

"What, you think you met her at some rich person's shindig?" Yuichi asked.

"I think so. I have a memory of her in a dress at a ball, or something like that."

A ball... They really did live in different worlds, Yuichi thought. "By the way, what's this about your brother?"

"I haven't seen him in a while," Aiko admitted. "I think he ran away from home."

"Huh?" Yuichi started, shocked by the revelation. "Ran away... you said you haven't seen him in 'a while,' so you don't know for sure how long? When did you talk to him last? Did he say anything then?"

"I think the last time I talked to him was the day I went out shopping with you," Aiko said. "He rushed up to me as I came to the door, but all he did was ask about you. It was the first time he'd talked to me in a while, too..." Aiko added, with a note of regret.

"Huh? Really?" Their shopping trip had been a week ago. That he hadn't talked

to her since then, and had gone missing at some point, suggested a degree of estrangement.

“He’d been acting really weird lately,” Aiko went on. “There was this time we were all eating together and he got mad and stormed off, and the last time I met him, he was really belligerent, too... When he said weird things before, I assumed it was his middle school syndrome and I didn’t take it that seriously. But lately I feel like it’s become something else... I haven’t tried to talk to him much lately because he’s frightened me so much.”

“I see... Well, I think I get the drift,” Yuichi said. “So, what do you want to do now that you know he’s gone?”

“I thought we might check his room,” Aiko said. “We might learn something there.”

“It’s worth a try. Where is it?”

“Across from mine,” Aiko said.

Yuichi stood up, left the room, and headed for the one opposite it. Aiko followed him.

The door wasn’t locked, and the knob turned without resistance. Yuichi trepidatiously opened the door and stepped inside.

“...Hey, Noro, do you guys usually leave coffins lying around?”

“Huh?” Aiko’s jaw dropped.

Kyoya’s room, like Aiko’s, was about twelve by twelve feet. There was a coffin sitting right in front of the door. Yuichi lifted the lid. There was dirt inside.

“I’ve never seen this thing here,” Aiko murmured. “I wonder... if he brought it from the crypt...”

“The crypt?” Yuichi asked skeptically. It wasn’t a word you usually heard in everyday conversation.

“Yeah, it’s out on the lawn. It’s the resting place for members of our clan.”

“Resting place? You don’t mean that literally, do you?”

“Huh? Oh, no, no... I mean, it’s where we put them after they die.”

Yuichi didn’t think it was unreasonable to assume that vampires could sleep in coffins, but apparently they didn’t go that far. Why, then, was there a coffin in Aiko’s brother’s room?

“Does your brother sleep here?” he asked.

“N-No way. He doesn’t go that far... I don’t think...” Aiko trailed off, clearly lacking confidence in the assertion.

Yuichi approached the coffin and had a look inside. There was only a thin layer of dirt at the bottom, so it would be possible to lie inside and close the lid. There was some color mixed in with the dirt, too, a stain from some dark red liquid. Blood, most likely.

“What... is this?” Aiko asked fearfully. She must have noticed the blood, too.

“He was injured, maybe... Could sleeping in a coffin speed up your recovery time?” Yuichi asked.

“That would be the first I’ve heard of it... I mean, we heal almost instantly from even major injuries, so why would he even need to?”

Yuichi decided it might be best to talk to Mutsuko as soon as possible.

He looked around the room for further clues.

The coffin had caught his attention right off the bat, but the rest of the room was just as odd. It was like a tornado had come through. The bed was split in two, the bookshelf was smashed, and the books lay scattered about.

“Hey. It’s not like this all the time, right?” he asked.

“Of course not! I glanced in once before when the door was open, and it wasn’t like this at all...” She must have been talking about the time she saw her brother practice swishing his cape in the mirror.

From the patterns in the dust, Yuichi decided, this must have happened very recently. Yuichi began scanning through the scattered books and magazines for clues.

“Hey, does your brother like girls with big breasts?”

“Huh?! Where did that come from?” Aiko exclaimed.

“Well, I don’t see any roleplay or costume fetish stuff... Just titty magazines.” Yuichi showed the materials in question to Aiko, whose face turned bright scarlet.

“Wh-Why are you looking at those?! This is sexual harassment!”

“Well, I just thought it might give us a clue to where he went. Like, maybe he’s gone somewhere with lots of busty girls around...”

“Idiot!” Aiko fumed. “That’s aimed both at him and you!”

Chapter 6: Monster Hunters Really Do Exist!

After a search through Kyoya's room, they returned to Aiko's and had a seat on her sofa.

"We didn't learn a whole lot," Yuichi said. "Have you asked anyone in your household?"

"Yeah," Aiko said. "No one's heard from him, and they don't know where he's gone. He's not going to school either, apparently..."

"Isn't your father worried?" Yuichi asked. "He seemed like a real doting dad. Hasn't anyone called the police?"

Although they were vampires, they were trying to live normal lives, so calling the police seemed like a natural course of action.

"It seems he put out a request to look for him, but he's not acting too worried, I guess. He never really gave my brother a lot of attention."

Yeah, that's how it goes for sons, Yuichi thought. "So what we do know is that he came back injured one time, and that he likes busty girls."

"Forget about the busty girls!" Aiko cried.

"We need to figure out where he went... right? You think he has a connection to the group from the abandoned hospital?"

"I don't think they're part of our clan. I don't know everyone in it, but I doubt any of them are street people."

"You don't think your brother is drinking blood and making more vampires, do you? If he wants to take over the world like you said, he'd need servants."

"No way. I don't think he'd ever go that far, and I've never heard of drinking blood making more vampires. I don't even think we can do that."

"But right now, we have to assume that they're connected somehow. Maybe I should have talked to them more..." Yuichi hadn't given much thought to the vampires in the abandoned hospital incident, but now he was pondering it.

“Well, I’m gonna start searching around. Noro, you should wait here at home.”

Yuichi stood up. He had a bad feeling about this.

“Huh? You’re leaving? I can go with you...” Aiko began.

“No,” Yuichi said, voice straining a little. “I feel like the scale of this is a lot bigger than we thought. If we end up in another fight, I don’t know if I can protect you.” He’d let her come with her to the hospital, but that was before he knew that things would had escalated. He didn’t want to knowingly put her in danger.

“Sakaki, this is my problem. I can’t just put it all on you,” Aiko responded, determinedly.

“Okay,” Yuichi consented. “But I don’t think there’s much more we can do by ourselves. Can I bring Mutsuko into this?”

After a moment’s thought, Aiko nodded. “Oh, and before we go, I want to introduce you to my mother.”

“That’s right, I haven’t met her, have I?” Yuichi asked.

Aiko led Yuichi to her mother’s room. Aiko’s mother sat in the glow of the LCD TV, the room’s only source of light. She was hugging her knees and watching the TV intently.

On the screen was a home shopping program, with two women talking cheerfully about combinations of health foods and diet equipment.

“Um, what’s with her?” Yuichi asked hesitantly.

Aiko turned on the light. “Mom, at least turn on the lights.”

“Oh, Ai. What’s wrong? I’m conserving energy! The little things really add up, you know.”

“The best way to conserve energy is to turn off the TV, Mom. Didn’t you know?”

“Oh, but I couldn’t! Who’s that with you, now?”

Aiko’s mother, Mariko, had a face even paler than Aiko’s, with dark circles under her eyes. She seemed like a woman who might have been beautiful if not

for the sickly air hanging over her. She was wearing a loose-fitting white dress that resembled a nightgown, which added to her air of slovenliness.

She's not at all like Noro, Yuichi thought. Now that he thought about it, Aiko wasn't much like her father, either.

"Yuichi Sakaki," Aiko said, introducing him. "He's in my class. I brought him here to help me out with something."

"A pleasure to meet you," Yuichi said politely. "I'm Yuichi Sakaki. I owe your daughter a whole lot."

"My! What's this now, Ai? You brought home a boy? And a handsome one, at that! Look at me, dressed the way I am..." Despite the appearance of ill health, Aiko's mother seemed rather high-strung.

"Mom... you've ordered even more weird stuff..." Aiko said.

The room was in disorder, in a way that was reminiscent of Mutsuko's room. This time, though, the clutter was mostly health equipment, clothing, and accessories. There were no windows in this room, either. It was around sunset now, but even if it were noon, it would probably be pitch black without the lights on.

"It is *not* weird stuff! This EMS uses electricity to strengthen your muscles. It's perfect for someone nonathletic like me!"

That doesn't actually work, Yuichi thought, but he bit his tongue. It wasn't any of his business.

"I just came to introduce him to you. So take it easy, okay, Mom?" Aiko begged. "Sakaki's going home pretty soon."

"Oh, really? That reminds me, Ai, have you sucked Sakaki's blood?"

"Mom! What are you talking about?" Aiko cried, flustered.

"You should mark him while you have the chance," Aiko's mother assured her. "And sucking blood can provide benefits—"

"Sakaki, go on without me!" Aiko insisted, sending Yuichi out of the room.

After a while, Aiko joined him outside, her face red for some reason.

“What happened?” Yuichi asked.

“M-Mom said that weird thing! Um, look, forget it!”

Yuichi decided not to pursue the matter any further.

They got back to Yuichi’s house only to find Yoriko standing just inside the front door, scowling.

He assumed it was because he’d brought Aiko with him, but that wasn’t what she ended up berating him for.

“Big Brother, you’re late!” Yoriko shouted.

“Why are you mad at me?” Yuichi asked. He couldn’t see how his being out a little late could have inconvenienced her in any way.

“When you get to our room, you’ll see! And why are you with Noro, anyway?”

“Oh, she had something to ask Mutsuko about, so I brought her along,” Yuichi said. “We stopped by her house, which is why I’m late. Sorry.” He still didn’t know why she was mad at him, but he apologized anyway.

“What?” Yoriko’s expression hardened.

Aiko shrank a bit, uncomfortably.

“Noro, I hope we can talk later,” Yoriko said, her voice monotone despite the gracious words. Then she walked back into the living room.

Confused, Yuichi and Aiko mounted the stairs, then headed for Yuichi’s room.

“Yo!” The first thing Yuichi saw upon entering was Kyoshiro Ibaraki, waving a hand and smiling breezily.

Yuichi stalked up to him, grabbed his arm, and twisted it behind his back.

With the joint locked, he pulled him off his feet and threw him backwards, sending the back of his head into the windowsill with a bang. It was a type of Ura Nage, a reverse throw in judo.

“What are you doing here?!” Yuichi demanded as Ibaraki cowered, rubbing the back of his head.

Ibaraki was blond and blue-eyed, with deeply set features, and the label

“Ibaraki-doji” over his head. He looked like a foreigner, but unlike Natsuki, he was a real monster, not just a figurative one. He was a genuine oni, too. A horn appeared on his forehead when he was using his power.

They had traded blows during the whole Natsuki incident, but afterward he’d tried to act like friends, much to Yuichi’s irritation.

“Hey! What kind of way is that to greet a person? You could have killed me!” Ibaraki protested.

“Oh?” Yuichi asked. “I thought you were tough.”

“Unless I’m in oni form, I’m no tougher than a human!”

“Oh, really? That’s too bad. That should have been fatal, then.”

“You’re such a jerk. How can you say stuff like that with a straight face?” Ibaraki demanded.

“Sakaki, that’s going a bit too far...” Aiko said, flabbergasted.

“So what do you want, and why at this hour?” Yuichi asked. It was around 7 PM by now.

“I came to return your gym uniform,” Ibaraki said, pointing to the desk. The gym uniform was lying on it, folded neatly. “Your mom said you’d be back by dinner and I should wait for you upstairs.”

“I told you you didn’t have to return it, didn’t I?” Yuichi asked.

“What was I gonna do with it?” Ibaraki shot back.

“Thrown it out, maybe?” Yuichi asked. “You know, since I said that to avoid ever having to see you again?”

“That hurts. You’re mean. After I came all this way...”

“Yeah, yeah. Thanks a million. Now you’ve done your thing, so leave.”

“We oughta go somewhere and hang out!”

“Didn’t you hear me? I told you to leave!” Yuichi was just about to employ force when he heard footsteps running down the hall.

“Hey, what was that sound? Has the love triangle resulted in a yandere

outbreak?!” Mutsuko burst through the door into the room.

“Yo!” Ibaraki said, raising a hand in greeting.

“Huh? Hey, Ibaraki! And Noro, too!” Mutsuko said as she looked around Yuichi’s room.

“He just got here and he’s already yelling at me to leave,” Ibaraki complained. “Talk to him, won’t you?”

“Yu, it’s important to be nice to your friends,” Mutsuko said sternly.

“We’re not friends.”

“Now, time for *you* to do some explaining! You’re always leaving me to go off with Yori and Noro! And now Ibaraki, too? I can tell you’re sneaking around hiding something from me! What is it?”

“No, actually, we just came here to ask you about that...” As Mutsuko began huffing, Yuichi quickly tried to bring her to grips.

“Oh, really? That’s okay, then!” Mutsuko said, her mood recovering on a dime. “Tell me all about it!”

She sat down in front of the low table. Yuichi and Aiko followed suit.

“Oh, don’t mind about me. I won’t tell anyone.” Ibaraki unwound himself from the windowsill to join them.

“We don’t want you here. Leave,” Yuichi said.

“Now, now, now... I could be useful, y’know? With whatever you’re asking your sister about. It’s gotta be something you can’t handle by yourself, right?”

Yuichi had to concede that, as an oni, Ibaraki might know something about vampires.

“What do you want to do?” he asked Aiko.

“Well, he’s not a normal person, so it should be okay...” she said.

It was true that Ibaraki was hiding his true identity from the world at large, too. It seemed unlikely that he would spread the information around.

“Fine,” Yuichi said. Then he began to explain the situation so far.

Yuichi explained that Aiko was a vampire, that her big brother had middle school syndrome and wanted to conquer the world, that he had seen vampires in the abandoned hospital, and that Noro's brother was now missing.

"First, let me point out one thing!" Mutsuko proclaimed.

"What is it?" Yuichi asked.

"The Pink Clinic is *not* abandoned!"

"Huh? But..." He was about to counter, but then he remembered. The lights had been on. You wouldn't see that in a true abandoned building.

"It's not a functioning hospital anymore, but someone's still maintaining it! I never miss a trick when it comes to that stuff!" Mutsuko said proudly.

"Ah, that's right," Yuichi said. "You like abandoned buildings, too."

"That's right! I don't go exploring in buildings someone clearly owns! You can't just barge in just because it *looks* abandoned!"

"Sakaki... what if those people were the owners of the building?" Aiko asked timidly. "What if we did something bad?"

"I dunno. Even if it was breaking and entering, we had to save the girl, right?" Yuichi didn't think he'd done anything wrong. "You know anything about vampires?" he asked Ibaraki.

"Vampires... they're kind of a different niche from us," Ibaraki said. "I can't remember them ever obviously intruding on our territory, at least."

"Yeah," Yuichi said. "I figured you wouldn't be useful."

"Hey, hang on! Oh, I know. Those guys've been more activate lately. There might be some connection there."

"Who are 'those guys'?" Yuichi said with annoyance. "Quit putting on airs and get to the point already."

"Listen, you," Ibaraki shot back, "there's such a thing as a conversational flow. A cryptic start catches interest and makes it go smoother... but well, whatever. I'm talking about monster hunters. I used to see them here and there, but lately they've been pretty active all over town. Makes it hard to sleep at night. I don't

think we're the ones they're after, though. Seems there's something else they want."

"Monster hunters, huh?" Yuichi thought back to the upperclassman, Rokuhara, who'd attacked Aiko in the school courtyard soon after the first term had started. He'd erected a barrier and created familiars from dirt, and said those were powers the monster hunters had lent him.

"What do you want to do, Noro?" Mutsuko looked at Aiko expectantly.

"Good question," Aiko said. "I want to bring my missing brother back, and get him to stop all his foolishness."

"Got it! Leave it to us!" Mutsuko announced.

Mutsuko really was reliable, Yuichi thought. He didn't yet know what she could do in this situation, but having her around always made him feel like things would work out.

"But I can't believe you're a vampire... Hey. What kind of stuff can you do?" Mutsuko asked, her eyes sparkling.

"Um, nothing in particular..." Aiko said apologetically.

"Can you release your Control Art Restriction System? Wield a Marble Phantasm? Oh, what about firing beams from your eyes, or stopping time?! Wait, you'd need a Stand to do that, right?"

"Um, I really don't know what you're talking about... I heal a little faster than most people, that's about it... and I don't like hearing sutras..."

"Do you suck blood? Have you sucked Yu's blood? Do you spend your days doing lewd blood stuff? There's something so erotic about sucking blood! Oh, yeah! It's an analogy for sex, too!"

"U-Um... I don't really do that..." Aiko looked down, her face red.

"Huh? Then how are you a vampire?" Mutsuko asked.

"If we don't drink blood now and then, we get sick. That's about it."

"Oh, so it's like a health drink? That's nothing compared to what we have to do," Ibaraki said.

It was true: he had said something earlier about their race's cannibalism feeling like a karmic punishment. Indeed, this felt tame by comparison.

"I see... that still doesn't sound very vampiric to me. Why do you think of yourself as a vampire, Noro?" Mutsuko asked, probing closer to the foundation of the idea.

"My parents say we're vampires, and I've never had any reason to doubt them," Aiko said.

"Sucking blood does seem to be the minimum requirement for a vampire... I guess you do barely clear the bar."

"Yeah," Aiko said. "I've heard that if we don't take in any blood at all, we will weaken and eventually die."

"How much blood do you need?" Mutsuko asked.

"Just a little, once every few months. That keeps most of the major problems away."

"Hmm... It does all seem a little diluted," Mutsuko mused. "You said earlier that your only weakness was sutras, right? It feels artificial, like you're actively restraining yourselves... Are your brother and the rest of your family the same way?"

"Yes... um... there are some people who drink a lot of blood, and they tend to look very young," Aiko said.

"That's really not what I expected... Maybe your clan are Dracula-alikes, watered down? Or maybe you're just classic vampires... It's tough." Mutsuko pondered.

"How are Dracula-alikes different from classic vampires?" Yuichi asked, wondering what hairs she was splitting this time.

"Dracula is a vampire who appears in a novel by Bram Stoker, but the folkloric vampires are a bit different from Dracula," Mutsuko explained. "The differences are important! There are a lot of different types of vampires, after all! In Japan we have blood-sucking yokai like the nure-onna, and Yugoslavia has blood-sucking watermelons, right? And they all have different weaknesses."

“Um, not sure how I feel about being compared to a watermelon...” Aiko murmured. She didn’t seem to like that at all.

“Well, it’s okay,” Mutsuko said. “Let’s assume for now that Noro’s clan is an extension of Western vampires that the stories are based on. Noro, you’re wondering if your brother is drinking blood to make more of his kind, right?”

Aiko nodded.

From what Aiko had told him, Yuichi had been taking that as a worst case scenario, too.

“The idea of sucking blood to make more of your kind came from ideas about disease,” Mutsuko said. “Well, with yokai and spirits and stuff, a lot of them are based on contemporary events and phenomena.”

“Right, like the Black Death. I’ve heard about the connection between pests and vampires,” Ibaraki said with a bit of pride.

“Hey, did you just throw in that little bit of trivia because you happened to know it?” Yuichi asked suspiciously.

“What if I did?” Ibaraki asked.

“Oh, Ibaraki!” Mutsuko exclaimed. “Recent research suggests that the Black Death that ravaged the Middle Ages wasn’t caused by pests, but was actually a viral strain of Ebola or Marburg hemorrhagic fevers!”

“And Sis, stop using every chance you can to show off *your* knowledge,” Yuichi said.

“Well, setting that aside,” Mutsuko went on, ignoring him, “we think of vampires as being a type of undead, someone who died and came back to life. You get legends like that anywhere in the world where people bury their dead — legends that if you don’t bury them properly, they’ll come back to life as a monster. So having vampire clans like yours around doesn’t match the standard vampire image.”

“Um... you’re not suggesting... I’m dead, are you?” Aiko asked in fear.

“Hey, don’t worry!” Yuichi gripped Aiko’s hand.

“Huh?” she asked. “Um...”

“It’s warm, see?” Yuichi explained.

She had all the signs of life, Yuichi thought. She definitely wasn’t undead.

“Quit flirting!” Ibaraki yelled.

“Shut up!” Yuichi snapped back.

“Anyway, it’s believed that vampire legends originated from instances of premature burials. People who weren’t dead, but in a death-like state, were put in coffins and buried. Then someone heard something and dug them up and found a person inside, covered in blood and struggling for breath. This death-like state is believed to have a connection to the disease that stiffens the body, known as catalepsy!”

“Enough about that,” Yuichi said. “Let’s get back to Noro’s brother. There was a coffin in his room with blood inside it. What does that mean?”

“Let’s see,” Mutsuko said. “Some stories say that vampires weaken if they can’t sleep in the soil of their homeland. From there arose stories that they absorb the spirit of the earth they sleep on to heal themselves. In that case, we can probably assume he’s just got a lot in common with your generic vampire? If so, he has a lot of limitations... So let’s list some of the common ones! First, their weak points are sunlight, garlic, holy water, holy ash, crosses, white magnolia stakes, and silver bullets. They don’t show up in mirrors, can’t cross running water, and can’t enter a house unless invited. Their powers include super strength, the ability to turn to mist, wolves, and bats, and flight. They can also charm people and suck their blood to enslave them, and stuff.”

“It all sounds like nonsense when you just list them out like that,” Yuichi said. There was no sense of unity to them, and there were too many specific features. He felt like they had to narrow it down.

“Well, that’s because it’s an amalgamation of people’s ideas about a lot of different monsters,” Mutsuko explained. “Silver bullets were originally the weaknesses of werewolves, and holy water and crosses were for the Devil. But over time, they all merged together. It’s like... how fanfic adds stuff to the original canon, then other creators add their ideas to the fanfic, and at some point it all gets treated like the original!”

“Um... Mutsuko, we don’t have any powers or weaknesses like that...” Aiko said apologetically.

“Well, that’s even better, right?” Mutsuko said. “If he doesn’t have any powers, then he can’t conquer the world, can he? But for safety’s sake, let’s assume he does! Let’s assume he can do all that stuff and go from there!”

Yuichi tried to imagine what a vampire with so many abilities would be like. He probably couldn’t beat something like that. Superhuman strength was one thing, but how do you fight something that could turn into mist?

“Anyway, our first step should be going to the hospital where Yu saw the ‘Vampire?’s! That place sounds really fishy to me!” Mutsuko announced, standing up abruptly.

“What, right now? Don’t you think it would be better to go there during the day?” Yuichi protested.

It was July, so it was still rather light out at this time of day, but it would turn dark soon. It didn’t seem smart to go, at night, to a place where they might find vampires.

“It’s been a while since your brother went missing, right? So we can’t afford to waste any time! By the way, Noro, do you get stronger at night or start acting any differently?”

“Huh? I dunno. I think I just get sleepy?” Aiko said, tilting her head.

“Everybody does that,” Yuichi criticized reflexively.

“I know that! I keep telling you, I don’t have any special powers just because I’m a vampire!” Aiko shouted.

In the end, after discussing how day or night seemed to make no difference to Aiko’s brand of vampire, they decided to head out.

They came to the remains of the Pink Clinic, AKA the Mochizuki Gastrointestinal Hospital.

The power, gas, and water were all working, confirming that despite appearances, it wasn’t really abandoned. It just seemed it was presented to look

that way.

The door at the front entrance was locked, but Yuichi just picked it again, and they had no trouble getting in.

Right before they went inside, they took out the masks they'd brought and put them on. Yuichi had the skull mask and Aiko the rabbit mask, like before. Mutsuko's mask was made out of wood, with creepy cavity-like holes in it.

Ibaraki apparently didn't care if anyone saw him, and just left his face bare.

"Look, since no one else is going to ask, I will. What exactly is that?" Yuichi pointed to Mutsuko's shoulder.

"This? It's an ultraviolet light projector!" Mutsuko proclaimed. There were enormous lamps mounted on both her shoulders and something that looked like a battery on her back. "It was this or a log, but I figured this one would be easier to wield!"

"Um... well, never mind. If a vampire appears, I'll let you handle them." Yuichi had his doubts as to whether something like that would work, but if Mutsuko thought it would, maybe it would. "And just to be safe, could you keep your voice down? It is night, and someone else might be here."

"Oh, please. Yu, you worry too much!" Mutsuko said loudly.

"That's exactly what I mean!" he hissed back.

They opened the door and crept inside. It was dark within.

"That device of yours might come in handy right about now," he pointed out.

"Oh, no! It's got, like, no battery life," Mutsuko said. "I've gotta save it for an emergency!"

"It's useless, then!"

"So, what do we do? It's too dark to see anything," Aiko asked nervously.

"Ah. I might have an LED..." Yuichi was about to pull a flashlight out of his pocket when the lights suddenly went on.

Yuichi squinted in the sudden brightness as Aiko hid behind him.

Someone else was there.

Yuichi expected it to be a vampire, or perhaps a delinquent. But he was disappointed.

“Oh, if the front door was open, we could have just gone in there,” a voice muttered from further inside the hospital. “All that work for nothing...”

Footsteps approached.

As his eyes adjusted to the light, Yuichi could make out three silhouettes. The labels above their heads read “Monster Hunter I,” “Monster Hunter II,” and “Monster Hunter III.”

The boy in the center looked so unremarkable, it was remarkable. He was completely without distinguishing features. He was about Yuichi’s height, dressed in an entirely average T-shirt and jeans. To his left was a large man in a white mask. He was about a head taller than the boy, and wore a tank top and half-length pants, which displayed his heavy musculature.

The person to the boy’s right was shorter than him, and wore a white mask and a body-concealing white cloak. The curve beneath the cloak in the chest area suggested this figure was a woman.

“Are you the owners of this place?” Yuichi asked, just to be sure.

“Certainly not. I suspect we’re in the same position you are,” The boy in the center answered without hesitation.

“Hey, who are these guys? Were they setting a trap for us? Are they enemies?” Mutsuko seemed excited by the mysterious group’s sudden arrival. “I bet the kid in the middle is the boss! I think he’s about your age, Yu. He’s got a real ‘mastermind’ quality to him!”

“Sis, could you calm down?” Yuichi asked. “They seem just as confused as we are.”

While he couldn’t see the expressions of the people in masks, and the boy’s expression hadn’t changed, something in his gaze suggested that he found them all very suspicious.

“Okay, okay. Fine.” Mutsuko backed down, reluctantly. She seemed to be abiding by her stance that Yuichi was de facto leader, and she was only helping

him.

“We came here for a test of courage. What about you guys?” Yuichi asked, deciding to probe deeper. He didn’t know who these Monster Hunters were, but they seemed like they might be more reasonable than the delinquents.

“Hmm, that’s interesting,” the boy said with a slight smile. “Even oni are doing tests of courage these days? I assumed you’d come here to eat.”

“I know these guys. They’re those monster slayer types,” Ibaraki said venomously.

They seemed to recognize each other.

“Monster slayers!” Mutsuko exclaimed. “Like Iscariot or Ura-koya!”

“Would you please shut up?” Yuichi hushed the still-excited Mutsuko, and turned his gaze back to the three monster hunters.

Monster hunters: those who hunted oni. Yuichi had heard of people like them before, and they weren’t a welcome presence right now. He didn’t care about Ibaraki, but what if they went after Aiko?

“I suppose there’s no point in trying to size you up,” the boy said. “You’re all hiding your faces, anyway. You clearly want to obscure your identities as much as possible.”

“You don’t have to hide yours?” Yuichi asked.

“As you can see, my face is excessively average. No one will ever remember what I look like. Now, let’s introduce ourselves. I’m known as Leader. I hunt monsters as a hobby.”

Yuichi examined the boy known as “Leader.” There was no menace in his posture whatsoever, and he didn’t appear to know martial arts.

“As for the man to my right... Just call him Giant. As you can see, he’s quite strong.”

“Giant, huh? Fine, whatever...” Giant said, sounding miffed. He looked like the strongest of the group to Yuichi.

“The woman to my left... let’s call her Knockers.”

“That’s sexual harassment, Leader,” the woman said.

“How about Sister, then?” Leader answered. “You’re so feminine, after all.”

Yuichi sensed no threat from the girl, either. Giant seemed like he would cause the most trouble.

“And you? If you wouldn’t mind introducing yourselves...” the leader addressed Yuichi and the others breezily.

“As you can see, I’m a fictional martial arts researcher!” Mutsuko exclaimed. She had clearly been trying her best, but it wasn’t in her to keep silent for long.

“As I can see, huh?” Leader asked, looking confused.

“Just think of these things on my shoulders as the Sexy Commando’s rings!” Mutsuko proclaimed.

“Don’t mind her,” Yuichi said. “You said we shouldn’t try sizing each other up, but we didn’t come here for anything special. Like I said, it’s basically a test of courage.” They really *hadn’t* come for any specific purpose, so it wasn’t even a lie.

“Oh? Ah, well... We came here to kill vampires. But it seems we were too late. The place was deserted.”

“Vampires... You’re sure there were vampires here?” Yuichi asked.

“That interests you, huh?” Leader asked.

“Didn’t I say we came on a test of courage?” Yuichi responded. “Having vampires here makes it all the better.”

“It seems there were some here, but they were all small fry,” the leader shrugged. “We’re looking for the original, the one who made them. Any idea who it might be?”

“Nope.” Aiko’s brother came to Yuichi’s mind immediately, but naturally, he didn’t say that out loud.

“Hmm, you’re being awfully tight-lipped. And after we’ve been so forthcoming. I’ll tell you one more thing: the original is injured. We nearly had him, but he pulled out his second form... No reaction to that, eh? Well, you’re wearing

masks, so it's hard to read your expressions. Ah, well."

Leader scratched his head, but he didn't really seem bothered by it.

"Well, it's all right. I was just thinking we might go back empty-handed when you came right to us. That should be enough for today." Leader turned to Sister. "You've caught on by now, right?"

"Yes. One oni. One vampire, though a rather weak one. Two humans. But one appears to be a Holder."

Yuichi stiffened at the words. He didn't care about Ibaraki, but Aiko's identity had been compromised?

"I see. Then let's just finish off those two." The moment Leader spoke, the lights went out.

Yuichi grabbed Aiko and leaped to the side.

"Sis!" He kept moving, dodging multiple objects that came flying at him as he made a mad dash for the sofa.

There was a "shing" noise of something metal springing outwards. Mutsuko had extended her saber and gone on the defensive.

Yuichi knew he didn't need to worry about Mutsuko in situations like these. She could take care of herself.

"Now, this was unexpected," Leader commented. "We can't fight or we'll hurt the humans, which is against our policy. We'll have to be going for today."

"Yu! Don't let them get away!" Mutsuko shouted.

Yuichi moved instinctively in reaction to her words.

The darkness around them presented no problem to Yuichi. He remembered the entire layout of the room, and could sense coming attacks through sound and air flow. He leaped over the line of sofas after the retreating monster hunters.

"Idiot! We can see you!" Leader shouted.

They had shut off the lights, after all, so they must have expected to fight in the dark.

The man known as Giant launched a straight punch aimed at knocking Yuichi to the ground. Yuichi dodged it and pressed into his personal space.

Furukami!

It was hard to move with much precision in the dark, so his best shot was to use overwhelming strength to keep the battle short. To that end, Yuichi activated his furukami. It was Yuichi's ace in the hole: the ability to exceed human limits.

Yuichi thrust his palm forward at point blank range, but Giant reacted, raising his left arm in front of his chest to guard. Yuichi had seen that coming, though — that was what the furukami was for.

He unleashed all his power on the blocking elbow. Despite Giant's well-honed musculature, Yuichi's fist broke the elbow and shattered his rib. He didn't bother to confirm that Giant had fallen before he went straight for Leader.

Leader threw something in his hands at him. Maybe he had just been pretending he didn't know any martial arts. The object sped towards him, but Yuichi dipped down to dodge it.

Leader shot a low kick at Yuichi's head, but Yuichi met the leg with an elbow and hit back with all his might.

Leader's leg let out a nasty snap.

As he fell, Yuichi grappled him, brought his hand around behind his back, and forced him to the ground.

"Sis!" Yuichi shouted.

He could tell the woman known as "Sister" was getting away. Not even someone like Yuichi could stop three people at once.

"Ultraviolet Light Device!" Mutsuko shouted. The device on her shoulders emitted a powerful blast of light.

Sister froze for a moment, blinded. Then Mutsuko, who had gotten up close to her at some point, unleashed her taser.

Yuichi tied up the monster hunters. He put their arms behind their backs and bound their thumbs together with zip ties.

After a while, the lights came back on.

Leader was sitting on the floor with his back against the wall. The masked man and woman lay on their sides, unconscious.

The humans, Yuichi and Mutsuko, ended up sitting across from the monster hunters.

Yuichi was feeling the aftereffects of the furukami, but he wasn't too badly off — he could still fight.

Mutsuko sat beside him with her saber out, ready for action. (More likely, she still hadn't perfected the sheathing mechanism. Yuichi was afraid she might stab him by accident.)

Aiko was waiting a little ways away, and Ibaraki had gone off to reset the breaker.

"You really got us. I never imagined something like this might happen," Leader said, dumbfounded.

"Did you really think *I* would let a mastermind escape?" Mutsuko declared.

"I don't even know you... Anyway, I can tell you're someone to watch out for. Are you always like this? Not just when you're wearing the mask?" Leader asked.

Mutsuko's way of speaking was certainly unique. Not even a mask could conceal her identity, Yuichi thought.

"And you, too," Leader said, turning disbelieving eyes to Yuichi. "What are you made of? You don't look like the kind of person who could break a leg." Despite his injury, though, he didn't seem to be suffering that much.

"It was dark. I had to rely on force," Yuichi said.

"And here I thought our training to act in the dark was perfect," Leader mused.

Yuichi also had some degree of night vision, but he had been caught off guard by the sudden blackout. He had been forced to move based on his memory of where things were, a monitoring of sound and air currents, and instinct.

"Oh, but this is really outside of the realm of expectation. This shouldn't have

happened to me. Not in such mundane circumstances, anyway," Leader complained.

"We got to see whose story was more robust, yours or mine. That's all it is!" Mutsuko proclaimed.

"How much do you know?" Leader asked, narrowing his eyes.

"There's nothing I don't know!"

"Don't lie. There are lots of things you don't know," Yuichi interjected to Mutsuko's insinuation.

"Well, never mind about that," Leader replied. "See, we're basically playing superhero. We vanquish the monsters running rampant in this world. We have nothing against humans like you."

"A likely story, after you attacked us!" Yuichi barked.

"You want to make a trade?" Leader said lightly, disregarding his anger.

"You really think you're in a position to offer a trade?" Yuichi asked.

"Maybe not, but then what will you do? Kill us? Torture us for information?"

"Leave the torture to me!" Mutsuko's eyes lit up at the mention of the word.

"Please, Sis, just shut up!" Yuichi sighed. "Fine. What kind of trade?" He had to admit he didn't know what to do with them after this. Handing them over to the police didn't feel right, but just releasing them could make trouble, too.

"There are two things we want: that you not try to learn more about us, and that you let us go. In exchange, our organization will keep away from the vampires and the oni. I don't know why you're working with non-humans, but it seems like you don't want us attacking them, right?"

"What guarantee do we have that you'll keep your end of the bargain?" Yuichi asked.

"You'll just have to trust us. I don't think I'm asking for anything out of line, personally," Leader said.

Yuichi looked at Mutsuko. Mutsuko nodded back, silently.

"Fine. But the vampires are the only ones you need to stay away from. In

exchange, I want you to answer some questions."

"Hey! What about the oni?" Ibaraki, just returning, yelled at Yuichi.

"Not my concern. You can fight the monster hunters forever, for all I care. Now, I want to know about the vampire you were after."

"Good point," Leader said. "If we agree to stay away from the vampires, things will keep getting worse. Someone needs to deal with them, so if you're willing to do it, we'll leave it to you."

Leader then proceeded to tell them about the vampire. He sounded an awful lot like Kyoya to Aiko. According to Leader, his group had almost taken him out, but he had gotten away at the last second.

"You said he had a second form?" Yuichi asked.

"Yeah," Leader said. "Some monsters can transform, and we call the transformation their second form. In his case, he grew wings and flew away. There's nothing we can do once they're in the air."

"Wings?" Yuichi looked at Leader as if expecting him to laugh, but he appeared to be serious.

"We were looking for places the vampire might be lying low, and we had two candidates to choose from," Leader said. "This was one, but it seems to be empty, so it must be the other one."

The other place was Seishin High School.

Chapter 7: World Domination Starts at Seishin High!

The next day was Saturday. Yuichi picked up Aiko in the morning and headed for school. If vampires really had infiltrated the school, they had to investigate.

As they neared the gate, they saw a bit of a commotion going on.

The gate was closed. Hanako Nodayama stood in front of it, facing off with a group of students. She had the label “Vampire?” above her head.

“Are you kidding me?” Until now, Yuichi hadn’t really believed the monster hunter’s words. He was convinced they couldn’t possibly go after the school.

“Ms. Nodayama is...?!” Aiko said in shock after Yuichi explained the situation to her.

“Hey, Ms. Nodayama. Nobody mentioned anything about this to me...” Shota was one of the students arguing with Hanako.

“The school is closed. Got it?” she said. “I mean, obviously...” She had her usual can’t-be-bothered air, but somehow seemed even more listless than usual.

Yuichi walked up to Shota. “What’s going on, Saeki?”

“Hey, that you, Sakaki? You here for club, too?” Shota asked Yuichi as he noticed him.

Yuichi gave a noncommittal response.

“Our good friend Hanako here won’t let us into the school,” Shota replied. “I don’t get it.”

Shota must have come to school for club activities. He was carrying a sports bag.

Yuichi looked at Hanako. There were the traces of a scar on her neck, and her eyes seemed empty.

“Has something happened here?” Aiko asked Hanako.

“Look, you really think I know? All I was told was to tell you that it’s closed. I’m

just doing my job, so get it through your heads and go.” Even if she was under a vampire’s control, Hanako was still Hanako.

Shota didn’t look convinced, but he must have realized he wasn’t getting in. He left, head tilted, and the other students followed suit. Yuichi and Aiko remained at the gate with Hanako.

He looked past her to the school grounds.

Hanako had claimed the school was closed, but there were Vampire?s wandering around on the lawn. They all seemed to be moving sluggishly; perhaps the sunlight really did weaken them.

It would be simple enough to get inside, but it didn’t seem like that alone would solve the problem.

“Perfect timing, Sakaki. I was told to get in touch with you,” Hanako said abruptly. “Let’s see, what was it again? ‘Come by tonight so I can kill you,’ I think.” Hanako looked up at the sky as she tried to remember.

“Um, that doesn’t seem like the kind of thing a teacher should be saying to a student...” Aiko said hesitantly to Hanako.

“Look, I’m just doing my job.” Hanako groaned in exasperation.

“Ms. Nodayama, what if I try to go in during the day?” Yuichi asked, just to be sure.

“Um, he’ll probably kill all the teachers, so please don’t? We’re not just servants, we’re hostages, too.”

So he had taken all the school faculty hostage...

But that much wouldn’t change just because Yuichi came at night. If it was equally risky one way or another, he had no reason to play into his hands and put himself at a disadvantage.

“Oh, I know what you’re thinking, but he really wants to slaughter you personally, so if you come at night, he probably won’t use the hostages as shields,” Hanako said. “So I’d really prefer it if you’d do that, y’know?” That seemed to be all she wanted to say to Yuichi, and she wouldn’t say any more.

Yuichi led Aiko a little ways away from the gate.

“...I didn’t think my brother would be this stupid...” Aiko said, her expression suggesting genuine disbelief. “Why would he go so far? What’s he going to do next week?”

Once the students came back to school, it would be obvious it was occupied..

“Maybe that’s when he’ll try to conquer the world...” Aiko seemed to be trying to sound cheerful, but wasn’t really succeeding. “He wouldn’t... would he?”

The monster hunter had told him about the powers Kyoya could use now, and one of them was the ability to enslave others. He could suck someone’s blood to get them to do whatever he wanted. It was a power that, if used right, certainly could be used to take over the world.

“You think things will keep getting worse if we don’t do something? Yuichi asked.

“I guess we can’t just call the police, huh?” Aiko said.

“If he has the whole faculty under his control, it probably won’t do any good,” Yuichi agreed. “They probably have some kind of cover story for if the police come asking around.” It was a more serious situation than he had thought. “Still, there’s something weird about all this. Why does your brother want to kill me?”

Yuichi couldn’t remember ever meeting Aiko’s brother, let alone doing something to deserve his resentment. Aiko didn’t seem to have any idea how they were connected, either.

Yuichi decided to go home for now. Mutsuko should be there, learning more about vampires.

“This is really bad!” was the first thing out of Mutsuko’s mouth when Yuichi walked in the door.

“Yeah, definitely,” he agreed. “We’ve confirmed that Noro’s brother is at the school.”

They took a seat at the low table in Mutsuko’s room, and Yuichi explained what he had seen.

“I already knew that!” Mutsuko took out her tablet computer and showed the

screen to Yuichi.

Yuichi could see images from their school in a series of windows on the screen. Inside the building, the courtyard, the pool, the gym, the sports fields... Every so often, the viewing angles changed.

He paused. “Okay, I have a lot of questions about this. First off...”

“This is the school, right? Why do you have this?” Aiko just asked right out, with none of Yuichi’s subtlety

“I installed security cameras! You never know when something might attack!” Mutsuko told them.

“Don’t give me that smug ‘I thought this might happen’ act! This is illegal!” Yuichi shouted.

“Sakaki, I think it’s a little late to be worried about legality...” Aiko ventured.

Aiko was right. Mutsuko had already engaged in more than her share of law-breaking behavior.

“Don’t you worry!” Mutsuko announced. “I put the utmost value on privacy, and I only use it for emergencies like this! So, anyway! As you can see, the school has already fallen into their hands!”

Glassy-eyed people were wandering around the school. Victims of Kyoya, it seemed.

“There seem to be a few different types among those affected. There’s this spaced-out type — their minds seem totally blank — the type that seems to have full autonomy, and the type that just keeps repeating a task they were ordered to perform.”

“That’s all well and good, but what did you mean when you said things were really bad?” Yuichi asked.

What she was showing them was certainly a problem, but Mutsuko’s words had seemed meant to indicate something more.

“Look at this!” Mutsuko used the tablet to call up the image of a classroom. About half a class’s worth of girls were sitting at the desks, staring forward, their eyes glazed over.

“Who are they?” Yuichi asked.

“Well? Notice anything?” Mutsuko asked him.

“Notice anything? Well, they’re all girls... Huh? Wait, that’s Orihara!”

“Ah! What’s she doing there?” Aiko cried, noticing at the same time.

Kanako was one of the girls in the room. She had the same glassy-eyed look as the other students.

Mutsuko just sighed. “Yu? That is true, but it’s not what I meant. You’re looking at the wrong thing! Shouldn’t it be obvious? They all have big breasts!”

“No one cares about that!” Yuichi cried. “Orihara’s more important, right? What’s she doing there?”

“That’s a good question,” Mutsuko said. “It seems they all got a call from the school telling them to come for extra lessons.”

“You mean... my brother...” Aiko stammered. Yuichi completely understood how she felt.

“Yes! By controlling the school faculty, he got access to the students’ personal information! So he chose the cutest girls with the biggest breasts and called them to school!”

“Big Brother, you dummy!” Aiko shouted.

“Now this is getting interesting! The survival club can’t sit silent while one of our own members is in danger! Call Takeuchi and let’s handle it together!” In spite of the grim situation, Mutsuko really seemed to be enjoying herself.

The group temporarily dispersed, with the agreement that they would meet up that night at the Chinese restaurant Nihao the China near the school.

Yuichi didn’t have much in the way of preparation to do, so he spent his day puttering around, while Mutsuko went off somewhere to “get things ready.”

As night fell, Natsuki arrived at Yuichi’s house in a white minivan.

“I bet that would be great for kidnapping!” Mutsuko exclaimed. It was an extremely rude thing to say, but Natsuki, its owner, didn’t seem to mind.

Yuichi and the others got in, picked up Aiko on the way, then arrived at Nihao

the China. Incidentally, the van was driven by “Stalker” Sakiyama.

After they reached their destination, Mutsuko gave Sakiyama a new set of instructions, and he drove off on his own.

The group entered the restaurant and took seats at the round table.

“Oh, you’re all together today! What’s the occasion? Are you worried about us not getting enough business?” Tomomi, in her cheongsam, seemed very pleased indeed. The others were in their school uniforms, as Mutsuko had insisted that it was a club activity.

“What happened to your speech tic?” Yuichi asked.

“Oh, well, I used to do that because not many people came here, but it’s a little embarrassing to keep it up when the same people keep coming...”

“Try to have some actual policy!” Yuichi cried.

Even at night, there were no customers around. Aside from Yuichi’s group and the staff, the only other resident seemed to be a single rat that scurried around here and there.

“You know, it’s pretty gross to have rats roaming around in an eating establishment...” he commented.

“Huh? Well, even though we don’t have any customers, we still do proper cleaning...” Tomomi tilted her head, apparently confident in the shop’s hygiene standards.

Mutsuko ordered a random selection of dishes. As usual, the food was delicious; the lack of customers certainly wasn’t because of the taste.

“So, what are you doing here?” Tomomi asked.

“Well, we needed to secure a center of operations near the school. So I was thinking we’d use this place!” As she spoke, Mutsuko placed a pair of glasses on the table. “It’s a portable computer meant to look like glasses. We can use them to communicate! They’re still in the prototype stage, so they’re short range and you’ll have to stay close to use them, but they’ll let us see whatever you see, Yu!”

It seemed Mutsuko was planning on giving him orders from here. Yuichi put on the glasses experimentally, and found mysterious numbers and arrows

appearing in his field of vision.

“Oh, that’s interesting,” he said. “What do the numbers mean?”

“They don’t mean anything, they just look cool!” she exclaimed.

“That’s stupid! Turn them off!” he snapped.

Mutsuko grumbled to herself as she pulled out her tablet and made a few taps and slides. The display immediately disappeared.

“So, what do we do?” Yuichi asked.

They were coming at night, as Kyoya had asked, but they hadn’t sorted out a more concrete plan than that.

“Just charge in there and sock him out!” Mutsuko declared. “What else do you need?”

“A little more specificity, please!” There were limits to how much irresponsibility Yuichi could take.

“Then... let’s see,” Mutsuko said, looking at Aiko. “Your brother seems to be in the student council room, but is there any way we can lure him out? If we do, we’ll have a lot more options.”

“Hang on a minute! You even have hidden cameras in the student council room?” Yuichi exclaimed.

“Well, you never know what a student council might be planning! You have to keep an eye on them!” she declared.

“They’re not planning anything!” he shouted.

Mutsuko pulled a mini-projector out of her pocket and projected it onto the restaurant wall as if she owned the place. The display showed video footage of the student council room.

Kyoya was paging through a leather-bound book with a listless expression.

He’s just posing, Yuichi thought, positive that the boy wasn’t actually reading a word of it.

“Orihara and the others seem to be okay,” Mutsuko said, checking the video again.

The display showed multiple locations at once, and Kyoya didn't seem to be doing anything in the classroom where Kanako was at the moment.

"Sis, can Orihara be put back to normal?" Yuichi asked.

Mutsuko had told them that Kanako and the others were under a charm spell, but according to the monster hunter, charm and enslavement were different things. Something to do with how their reflexes worked... It was beyond Yuichi's ability to understand it.

"Let's see," Mutsuko pondered. "The monster hunter guy said the charm won't last very long, so if we get them out and lock them up somewhere, it should go away naturally, I bet. The bigger problem is the people who had their blood drained. Apparently their domination runs a lot deeper."

"We have to kill the original," Natsuki stated flatly.

"No way..." Aiko trailed off, speechless.

"Wait a minute. We can't do that," Yuichi protested. "This is Noro's brother we're talking about."

"I don't know much about vampires, but it's easy to see that sucking blood confers a powerful geis upon their victims," Natsuki said. "To save the victims, you likely have to kill the original vampire."

"I see," Mutsuko mused. "I'd rather not do it, for Noro's sake, but we should be ready, if it comes to that."

Mutsuko could really be very unfeeling when it came to people outside her immediate circle, and Aiko's brother, whom she'd never met, was apparently too distant a connection to qualify for her sympathy.

Whatever Mutsuko's feelings, though, it wasn't so easy for Yuichi to prepare himself for the idea. Aiko bowed her head, as well, as if in shock.

"Of course, that's a worst case scenario situation," Mutsuko added, as if in consideration for Aiko. "If we can end this without killing him, we will!"

"Sakaki, let me offer you some advice," Natsuki said, looking straight at Yuichi.

"What?"

“It’s about killing people. One of the primary reasons I can kill people is because I’m not thinking of them as the same species as me. Your sister said this before, but the instinctual resistance to killing really only applies to those of the same species, human to human. Humans have no trouble killing animals, right? At least, they don’t feel the same conflict as they do when they kill a human. So you just need to change your mindset: think of the person you’re fighting as inhuman.”

“Just change my mindset, huh?” Yuichi wondered if it would be that simple.

“If you pop your cherry on Noro’s big brother... Wow, that sounds pretty BL, huh?” Mutsuko asked cheerfully.

“Would you show a little consideration, Sis?!” Yuichi exclaimed.

“Shall I offer my advice, too?” Mutsuko offered.

“Sure, I can’t stop you,” Yuichi muttered.

“A vampire’s weak point is the heart!” she declared.

“So is mine!” he shouted.

“I don’t know if they’ll work, but take them along. Stakes of white magnolia.” Mutsuko handed Yuichi a few narrow pieces of wood the size and shape of pencils.

Yuichi put the stakes in his breast pocket. Did she want him to stab these through Aiko’s brother’s heart...?

The door fell inward with a bang.

“Huh?” Yuichi looked at the entrance in confusion, and saw the words “Anthromorph (Wolf).”

A humanoid creature covered in animal fur stepped onto the kicked-in door and lumbered inward, followed by more. There were seven of the creatures in all. Yuichi didn’t know what they wanted, but they certainly didn’t look friendly.

“Hey! Why did you kick in our door?” Tomomi asked indignantly.

“How did you know we were here?” Yuichi asked as he and Natsuki rose, ready to fight.

“The rat you saw earlier was his familiar, which told him where we were! And the monster hunter said he has ghouls and lycanthropes serving him, so he sent some of those after us!” Mutsuko exclaimed, as if she had known it the whole time.

“Tell us this stuff earlier!” Yuichi shouted.

“Wh-Wh-What?!” Aiko stammered in confusion.

“So there’s more than just one of them, eh?” Yuichi murmured.

The “Anthromorph (Wolf)”s were bipedal monsters with doglike faces that stood about as tall as your average human. He had seen one at the hospital before, so their existence itself didn’t surprise him, but the sight of them in the familiar Chinese restaurant felt like an intrusion into his daily life.

“Sakaki, aren’t you surprised?” Aiko asked, seeming slightly calmer, perhaps influenced by Yuichi’s own muted reaction.

“No, I am surprised,” he said.

And indeed he was. But panicking about an unknown enemy wouldn’t help him fight it. To be able to set aside surprise and do what he needed to do... That was the point of his training.

Yuichi looked around the store. Tomomi was an innocent bystander, and he didn’t want to cause trouble for her... But Tomomi, surprisingly, seemed absolutely calm.

“We do want more customers around here, but we don’t serve dog-people, okay?” she said. “And we can’t have you threatening our customers, either. Dad!”

“Leave this to Nihao the China!” A man with a braid dashed out of the kitchen.

“Who *are* you?!” Yuichi cried. But even as he asked, he knew the answer. It was “Nihao the China.” Nothing more, nothing less. It was written above the man’s head.

“Yu! Let Nihao the China handle this and go on ahead!” Mutsuko said, eyes glistening.

“As if!” Yuichi yelled, hesitant to follow the command.

Nihao the China dropped his hips and struck out an elbow to take out one anthromorph. It was a riding horse stance elbow strike; he must be a practitioner of bajiquan.

“I’ll help him, Sakaki,” Natsuki said, pulling a scalpel from her pocket. “You go.”

With that, Yuichi made up his mind. As Nihao the China used bodyslams and back slams to knock the anthromorphs around, Yuichi flew out of the restaurant.

Yuichi arrived at Seishin High School and walked through the open gate, heading for the new school building. The student council room would be on the fourth floor.

“Well? Can you hear me?” Yuichi asked.

“Loud and clear,” Mutsuko responded through the computer glasses Yuichi had put on.

“How are things on your end?” he asked.

“All done,” Natsuki said, her voice joining Mutsuko’s through the glasses. “Should I join you? I could finish him off if you can’t.”

“No, it’s easier if I go alone,” he said. “And I don’t want to put that responsibility on you.”

“Shall I interpret that as an expression of love?” Natsuki asked.

“Why would you?!”

“Sakaki... um... don’t take on more than you can handle,” Aiko added through the glasses.

“I’ll be fine,” Yuichi assured her. “We’ll talk first.”

Kyoya wouldn’t necessarily be unreasonable, Yuichi thought. Just because he was a vampire didn’t mean he wouldn’t be willing to talk. Maybe they could come to some kind of understanding.

Yuichi entered the school building, preparing to make his way towards the student council room. But he quickly realized there was no need. As he left the entryway hall that was full of shoe cupboards and headed into the corridor, he

spotted a man walking towards him.

“Vampire II.”

The man approaching him was the archetypical image of a vampire. He wore a red-lined cape over full evening wear. He had long, silver hair that billowed out behind him.

“Big Brother!” he heard Aiko shout.

So this was her big brother, Kyoya.

He strode fearlessly up to Yuichi until they were about five meters apart, then stopped.

“Why did you send your men after me?” Yuichi asked.

“You were taking your sweet time, so I thought I’d send an escort... Just in case you were thinking about fleeing in fear.” Kyoya gave a dry chuckle.

“I’d been wondering what your beef was with me,” Yuichi commented. “You’re the vampire who attacked me the other day, right?”

Judging by the label above his head, Kyoya had been the man in the hood who had attacked Yuichi the day he’d gone out with Aiko. The hood had hidden his face at the time.

“But I still don’t know why you attacked me in the first place,” Yuichi continued. “What exactly did I do to you?”

“I was entirely indifferent to you at the beginning,” Kyoya sneered. “But then I saw how happy Aiko looked when she was with you... and I began to feel the urge to see her face contort in despair.”

“Huh?” Yuichi asked, baffled.

“Brother, why?” Aiko whispered weakly. It was surely an unbelievable thing to hear.

So, Aiko was the reason Kyoya had gone after Yuichi. He was focused squarely on her.

Judging from what Aiko had said, they had never been particularly close, but Yuichi had never imagined it would go this far.

“Look, I don’t know where the bad blood between you two comes from, but that’s a damn crummy thing to say,” he said. Any respect Yuichi might have felt towards a senior and his friend’s brother crumbled within him immediately.

“Ah. I see you don’t know what lurks beneath her surface! Everything she did, and she doesn’t even remember it... It’s ridiculous!” Kyoya flew into a sudden rage, as if remembering something. Whatever it was, it must have been awful, to drive such a wedge between siblings. But Kyoya refused to elucidate.

There was a moment’s pause.

While Yuichi was considering what to do next, he heard a sound of something ripping through the air.

“Huh?!” Yuichi couldn’t believe his eyes.

Huge bat wings were now spreading out behind Kyoya. Enormous wings connected by thin webbing were growing out of his back.

“Sis! He just sprouted wings!” Yuichi shouted.

“Oh, yeah! They said he grew wings to escape, remember?” Mutsuko agreed.

Yuichi had already seen the wolfmen, so he knew that monsters must exist. But knowing they existed was very different from seeing one transform in front of your eyes.

“Hey, you think those wings tore up his clothing?” Mutsuko asked.

“Nobody cares!” Yuichi shouted.

Kyoya tilted forward in a runner’s stance. There was a snapping sound of his wings catching air and he charged forward at unbelievable speed.

VAMPIRE II

Panicked, Yuichi managed to dodge, sending Kyoya rushing past him before he spread his wings again to stop himself.

“What the hell?!” Yuichi knew the boy was a vampire, but he’d been expecting Kyoya’s abilities to fall within the usual human realm of expectation. He hadn’t really expected him to fly.

“Yu! Stay cool! He’s gonna come after you again!” Mutsuko declared.

“Shut up! This is bizarre! Why can he fly?!” Yuichi shouted.

Kyoya descended to the floor. “Hmm. Not a very precise way of moving, are they? But what about this?” Kyoya’s legs began to change.

Yuichi couldn’t explain what he saw, exactly, but the next thing he knew, Kyoya’s lower half had become a wolf’s body. His torso sprouted out of the wolf’s back.

“Huh?!”

“Ah, I guess his clothing is part of the transformation!” Mutsuko said, chattering away in his ear. “Well, that sort of transformation is impossible under the laws of physics anyway, so I guess he can do it however he wants!”

The wolf ran along the ground, planting its feet with great precision as it rushed at him with blinding speed.

The wolf tore at him with fangs and claws, giving the baffled Yuichi no choice but to dodge. He rolled along the floor, giving himself a little distance from the beast.

“Yu, you can’t be surprised by every little thing!” Mutsuko told him.

“This isn’t exactly a little thing!” Despite his confusion, Yuichi kept moving.

At last he decided he needed to counter the wolf’s continuous onslaught. He lashed out with a fist, but what followed struck him completely dumb.

His fist passed right through.

The wolf’s body had turned to mist, rendering his attack entirely meaningless. Yuichi dropped low as he followed through the attack’s momentum, then turned back around.

Kyoya was immediately on top of him again, having re-established his physical form.

“Listen, you never know what’s going to happen, so you can’t stop to be surprised by everything that happens!” Mutsuko shouted. “I taught you that, remember?”

Mutsuko had indeed taught him to roll with whatever he encountered. But that seemed all but impossible when dealing with a shapeshifting monster.

Kyoya flapped his wings, assaulting Yuichi with gale-force winds. Yuichi lowered his center of gravity to keep from being thrown off his feet, but it still left him frozen in place.

The wolf fell upon him once more.

Yuichi dodged its bite and tried to get around behind it. It was an instinctive reaction when dealing with quadrupeds, and Yuichi immediately regretted it.

He had forgotten about the monster’s human torso. Perhaps that was Kyoya’s plan — he hadn’t used it before now in order to get Yuichi’s guard down.

Now, Kyoya lashed out with a backfist.

Yuichi managed to dodge it, but what followed was completely unbelievable.

An enormous black fist lashed out at him as if from nowhere.

He couldn’t dodge it.

He raised his arms to block, but it wasn’t enough. The power of the blow sent him flying through the air.

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Nihao the China was a mess of broken chairs and scattered dishes.

The shop owner — also named Nihao the China — silently cleaned up while Tomomi grumbled at him. Nearly all of the damage had been caused by Nihao the China himself in the process of his rampage.

The defeated anthromorphs had returned to human form after being knocked unconscious, and he had thrown them out of the shop. He had said that if they wanted to run away, they were free to do so, and Mutsuko and the others were

in no position to complain. This was his shop, after all.

Thankfully, the round table had been spared the damage, so the three remaining members of the survival club had chosen to stay there, watching the footage from the security cameras and Yuichi's glasses projected on the wall.

"Sakaki!" Aiko stood up quickly as she saw Yuichi fly back. "Mutsuko! There's no way he can fight him! No one ever told me that vampires could do things like that!"

But despite Aiko's concerns, Mutsuko's eyes continued to shimmer with excitement. "Incredible! I've never seen anything like it! But Yu's own abilities are... hmm, maybe I should have researched some monster-fighting jukenpo?"

The image from Yuichi's glasses blurred for a moment, then reinitiated. The feed showed Kyoya's transformed body from a low angle; the device had been knocked off of Yuichi's face.

"Mutsuko! Are you listening to me? Sakaki's going to die!" Aiko entreated Mutsuko, who seemed much too laid-back about all of this.

"Well, I'll admit he's in trouble, but he hasn't lost yet," Mutsuko said.

"How is he supposed to beat something like that?" Aiko exclaimed.

"Good question," Mutsuko said. "At his current skill level, he might not be able to."

"Then shouldn't we go help him?!"

"I don't see how there's anything I could do," Mutsuko said with such flippancy that it must have been her honest opinion. "What about you, Takeuchi?"

"I don't think I could beat it," Natsuki evaluated cool-headedly. "Really, it's a miracle that Sakaki is even still alive. The first hit would have killed me."

Even Natsuki couldn't have beaten it. It was on a completely different level.

"Fine... Fine, then!" With that, Aiko flew out of Nihao the China.

"What should we do? Do you have any ideas?" Natsuki asked, clearly flustered despite her outward calm.

“Good question,” Mutsuko said. “I don’t have any ideas, but I think Yu can win!”

“Why?” Natsuki was amazed that Mutsuko wasn’t at all worried. Her brother was clearly dying. It didn’t seem like the behavior of a girl who loved her brother.

“I believe in Yu,” Mutsuko said simply. “That’s all!”

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Hitting the wall drove all the air out of Yuichi’s lungs. He only just barely managed to stay conscious. He fell to the floor, face first, unable to dull the impact.

He’d positioned himself to land back-first to lessen the shock, but it had barely mattered. He hadn’t expected to fly back ten meters and crash into a wall.

It was the wing that had hit him — the wing, transformed into an enormous fist.

He had made a terrible mistake in judgment. The momentum had completely turned against him. Yuichi had underestimated what a vampire could do.

Perhaps it was because he was always around Aiko; he had convinced himself that it couldn’t be that bad. But this was a monster. Eyes shining red, fangs fully bared, huge bat wings growing from his back... It could turn into mist, and even into a wolf. It was completely unlike anything Yuichi had faced before.

It was an honest-to-goodness monster.

How could anything Yuichi knew about the world possibly apply to it?

The principles of his martial arts were based on expectations about human limits. He knew a few things about fighting animals, as well, but there was no reason to think those would work on a vampire.

Kyoya reverted to human form and stalked slowly towards Yuichi. “Hmm. It seems I’ll finally have vengeance for the humiliation I suffered at the hands of a lower lifeform like you. Well, you fought well enough... for a human,” Kyoya said, haughtily.

Yuichi couldn’t find it in him to argue. He could barely even move. He’d reached the limits of what he could do with the furukami. It was the only thing

that had kept him from being killed on the first hit. The blood spilling from his forehead blurred his vision.

“You’re like a tiny thorn on my path to world domination,” Kyoya announced. “I just couldn’t move on until I’d paid you back for the humiliation you inflicted on me. Now, all that remains is to deliver your corpse to Aiko. Then I can leave the past behind me.”

Yuichi struggled to catch his breath. If Kyoya was going to take his time, then he had to make efficient use of that time. Yuichi picked himself up slowly, coming to one knee.

What do I do now?

Mutsuko and the others must have been watching, but no advice came. The glasses were on the floor nearby, but no voices came through it. The transmitter must have broken. In other words, he couldn’t count on Mutsuko anymore.

But Yuichi had no intention of going out quietly. Just because he couldn’t win was no reason to simply give up.

But can I do it? That’s Noro’s brother there... He was hesitant. Kyoya clearly wouldn’t stop and talk or see reason, but still, knowing that he was part of Aiko’s family gave Yuichi pause.

“Big Brother, stop it!” A voice cried out from behind Yuichi. He turned to look at it. It was Aiko, running towards him from the entryway hall.

“Idiot! What are you doing here?” Yuichi shouted.

Aiko interposed herself between Kyoya and Yuichi.

“Oh? I can’t believe you came right to me,” Kyoya said smugly. “Everything just seems to be going my way today.”

“This is all crazy! Knock it off and come back to your senses!” Aiko shouted.

“I am in perfect command of my senses. It was the way I was before — twisted and oppressed — that was mad. Don’t you agree?”

“What are you doing?” Yuichi demanded uncertainly from behind Aiko’s trembling form. He couldn’t let her stay there.

“I’m protecting you, of course!” Aiko cried.

“Please, just run away!” Yuichi shouted.

Kyoya flapped his wings, sending out a gust that sent Aiko tumbling backwards.

Yuichi sprang to his feet and seized Aiko in his arms. He hit the wall again, knocking the wind out of him once more.

“Aiko, you shall be allowed to die after him, writhing in the grips of deepest despair,” Kyoya said.

Yuichi was stunned by the sheer callousness in his voice. Kyoya’s hatred apparently ran deeper than Yuichi could have imagined. If Yuichi fell, then he really would kill Aiko.

“Sakaki...” Aiko turned in Yuichi’s arms to look him in the eye. “Mom told me that I have the power to protect the people I care about.”

Yuichi had a bad feeling about where this was going.

“I didn’t believe her... but if my brother can turn into something like that, then maybe it was true, right?” Aiko smiled, and with great trepidation, returned Yuichi’s embrace.

Yuichi couldn’t move.

“I’m sorry.” She pressed her face to his neck.

He could feel her tongue tracing along the line of his neck, licking up the blood that stained it.

He felt her fangs extend, then sink deep into his flesh. The pain caused him to writhe.

“Please! You don’t have to do this!” he shouted. “I...”

He couldn’t stop Aiko from drinking his blood.

Chapter 8: Vampire Versus Vampire!

The feeling of having his blood drunk was pleasant. Was it because Aiko was the one doing it, or because the act itself was pleasurable?

Yuichi could barely move, so he certainly couldn't fight back. He was forced to yield to Aiko entirely.

Aiko laid Yuichi back on the floor and stood up.

"Ha!" her brother laughed. "What do you plan to do, Aiko? You think that drinking a little blood will help you?" His tone was an amalgamation of fear, jealousy, and hatred.

Shining wings began to unfold from Aiko's back: thin and delicate, like many layers of thin glass on top of each other. At the same time, four blades appeared around her, equally transparent and seemingly without substance. Her eyes had turned red, and Yuichi could see fangs peeking out from the corners of her mouth.

"Vampire Princess." At some point, the label above Aiko's head had changed, as well.

VAMPIRE PRINCESS

The world around Yuichi was spinning. He had never dreamed that Aiko might transform.

“No! Don’t you dare! You always do this... It’s always about you!” Kyoya shouted. He had abandoned all pretense of his earlier haughty calm.

He began a new monstrous transformation, morphing into a wolfman covered in silver fur.

His transformation complete, Kyoya dashed forward. He leaped into the air, brandishing his claws to tear at Aiko.

Aiko thrust her palm towards him, causing the blades hovering around her to lance forward towards Kyoya. They drove him back while still in midair and struck him to the ground.

“Your blood isn’t tasty, Big Brother,” she said calmly. The blades returned to their formation around Aiko. These were Aiko’s fangs, and they were now stained in blood. “Wait for me, Sakaki. I’m going to end this.”

The chill in Aiko’s voice brought Yuichi back to his senses.

“Don’t you dare! I didn’t ask you to do this!” Yuichi fought against his unsteady legs, trying to rise.

He couldn’t let Aiko kill her brother. Mutsuko had told him once that killing someone could scar a person in a way that they would never fully heal from.

Aiko gave another gesture, and her fangs slashed at Kyoya once more.

Kyoya stood up and began sprouting more arms. Two new arms now grew from each shoulder, giving him an Asura-like silhouette. He used four of those bestial arms to seize each of Aiko’s attacking fangs.

“Well? What now?” Kyoya asked as he approached Aiko.

She threw both hands in front of her — perhaps trying to regain control of the fangs — but Kyoya kept tight hold on them.

Kyoya lowered his center of gravity and ran towards her.

Aiko awkwardly flapped her wings to get out of the way, but although they likely existed to let her fly, she wasn’t used to them at all. She ended up losing

her balance and, unable to remain properly airborne, hit the wall.

Kyoya dove upon her, thrusting out with his savagely extended claws.

Aiko brought her wings in front of her to defend herself, but the force of the claws sent her flying back.

Aiko hit the wall and fell down beside Yuichi. Nevertheless, she stood up again.

Her eyes glowed, her wings extended. She took a step forward, ready to keep fighting to protect Yuichi.

Stop it... Yuichi didn't want her to do this for him.

Kyoya laughed. "Serves you right! You think a little sister can beat her big brother?"

They were both superhuman. There was no room for Yuichi to interfere. This was no battle for an ordinary human.

So... so what? Yuichi forced power into his legs. *Did I really make you worry that much?*

Slowly, he rose.

You really think I'm so weak that you have to do something like this?!

Aiko couldn't move her wings properly. She must have been at the limit of her strength.

"This is it! The proof that I've overtaken you as a vampire! That I'm stronger than you are!" Kyoya brandished his claws again and charged straight for Aiko.

Aiko began to topple over, her strength gone. She couldn't protect herself anymore.

Kyoya's claws were aimed right for Aiko's heart.

Yuichi unleashed a primal scream.

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"What's going on with Noro?" Natsuki murmured as she watched Aiko's transformation.

Shining wings had appeared on Aiko's back. Her eyes had shone red, and fangs

had poked out from behind her lips. There was no sign of the easygoing Aiko that they knew.

The closest frame of reference that Natsuki had was the horn that appeared on an oni's brow. That was also semi-transparent and insubstantial.

"Maybe it's the power of love! Hey, does that mean you can transform too, Takeuchi?" Mutsuko asked excitedly.

"No, I..." Natsuki did have something inside of her, the source of both her superhuman strength and her urge to kill. But it had never caused her to transform.

"This is kind of a 'wow, really?' moment, huh?" Mutsuko babbled. "When you think of female vampires, you'd expect something more like Carmilla, right? The real sexy type! But Carmilla was a lesbian, so I guess this is sexy in a different way!"

Mutsuko showed not the least bit of surprise by Aiko's transformation, and just kept blabbing on about whatever came to mind.

"Should we have stopped Noro?" Natsuki asked. Now that she was gone, there was nothing they could do. Perhaps, Natsuki thought, they should have stopped her from going.

"Good question," Mutsuko said. "It'll probably be scary for her... but she'll be okay. Yu won't let anything bad happen to her."

Natsuki looked at her dubiously. Yuichi couldn't win; Mutsuko must surely realize that.

Natsuki had been surprised when Aiko had run in and abruptly transformed, but she didn't think it would change anything. Aiko didn't have enough practical combat experience. No matter how much power you had, it meant nothing if you couldn't use it.

"Sakaki can't move anymore," Natsuki said.

"Yeah," Mutsuko nodded. "He used a full-body furukami and he's reached his limit."

"That vampire is stronger than him," Natsuki added.

“Looks like!”

“So how is he going to win?”

“He’s reached his limit and he’s been rendered immobile against an overwhelming enemy, so he’s lost... Is that what you think? Give him a little credit! Yu’s not that weak! You think he’s the protagonist of the kind of story where the heroes fail, to make a statement about the cruelty of the real world and how bad endings are more realistic? No!” Mutsuko proclaimed. “This is *the turning point*! Got it? When you’re the best of the best, you always find a way!”

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The bestial arm spun end over end through the air.

Kyoya watched it fly, but he could not understand what he was looking at.

It traced an arc towards the ceiling, blood trailing behind it.

His claws were about to pierce Aiko’s heart... but now it was Yuichi who stood in front of him.

Yuichi’s arms were crossed and stretched in front of him, and he was falling backward.

He should have been finished already... What was he doing there? But just as the thought entered Kyoya’s mind, Yuichi disappeared.

Kyoya’s vision tilted.

The next instant, he realized that he was the one falling over.

Everything was moving in slow-motion.

The pain in his arm and leg registered simultaneously.

Kyoya suddenly realized that he was missing a hand, and that his left leg was twisted at a bizarre angle from the knee down.

His memory of how things had come to this were blurry. What had happened? Who had it done this to him? He couldn’t even begin to piece it together. All he could do was feel time passing.

He reached out instinctively, attempting to stop his fall. But he was not allowed.

He felt fingers stab into his eyeballs, then felt the impact of his head striking the wall.

Everything went black. But it only lasted for a moment. The next thing he knew, Yuichi's face was in front of him.

"You son of a—" Kyoya attempted, but a dislodged jaw kept him from finishing his curse.

Yuichi had used the heel of his hand to strike Kyoya's jaw at extremely close range. The whole mandible had gone flying. The pain caused Kyoya's vision to cloud over.

He flailed desperately with his six arms. If only one of them could hit...! But he only made the situation worse, as Yuichi dealt with each arm systematically, one at a time.

Yuichi began to pummel Kyoya indiscriminately, with fists, with chops, with jabs from his fingers. He twisted his joints and broke his bones.

Another transformation... But the time it would take would create a fatal opening.

Healing... But he'd been regenerating this whole time; it simply couldn't keep up.

He's a monster.

It was impossible to believe this man was human. Kyoya didn't even know what it was he was fighting. He had absolutely no idea what was going on.

At last, Kyoya's feelings caught up with the circumstances around him.

Terror...

He was experiencing the primordial fear of death. He couldn't even get a good look at Yuichi. It was impossible to even stay on his feet. His body was in a constant state of being destroyed.

Kyoya spread his wings. Those, at least, he could still use. Maybe if he got away from the school...

But Yuichi kicked off the ceiling to assail him from above. He struck down with

a heel and smacked Kyoya back to the floor. Then, without a moment's pause, Yuichi threw the stakes in his hand.

The slender stakes of white magnolia stuck into Kyoya's back. Blood — the source of his power — flowed out of him. The fluid from which his immortality sprung was draining away.

There was only so much his regeneration could do, and now it was reaching its limits.

Kyoya felt suddenly, acutely aware that he was standing on the verge of death.

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"He won," Mutsuko said quietly.

"Huh?" Natsuki asked, jaw slack.

"Get in the spirit, Takeuchi! Give me a good, proper 'yeah!'"

Natsuki couldn't understand what Mutsuko was talking about, nor could she process what was happening in the video that was being projected on the wall.

"The hero in a manga can't bring out his all until he's really up against the wall! ...Though he may have overdone it a little." Mutsuko knitted her brow in concern.

"What even was that?" Natsuki burst out.

"What? Oh, the thing at the start? That's the Type 0 Extreme Defense Technique, 'Fukuro'! It's a move when you focus your opponent's power and your own body weight into torque, all against a single joint... and wow, I know joint locks can be powerful, but I wasn't expecting him to tear it right off!"

"I thought he couldn't move..." Natsuki stated in disbelief.

"That kind of thing is all about the mood, though. Even a robot that's out of fuel can move if you shout at it enough!"

"He didn't do any of this when he fought me... What does it mean? Wasn't he fighting me seriously?" Natsuki's face screwed up in frustration.

"Well, he's removed another of his limiters," Mutsuko explained. "The furukami removes the limiters on his body. But there's also a limiter on the mind.

I mentioned it before, remember? Humans generally can't kill other humans, and any attacks against another human will have an inherent resistance built in. If you remove that resistance, things can get pretty scary! In other words, Yu is currently attacking with intent to kill. That's the difference between this and his battle with you!"

"Something so simple can make that much of a difference?" Natsuki asked.

Don't think of him as human. Natsuki had given Yuichi that exact same advice. Yet there was something unbelievable about the scene unfolding in front of her eyes.

"It's because Yu's such a nice guy. Though that can cause its own problems... I bet he almost didn't even use it!" Mutsuko exclaimed.

Yuichi was showing no mercy. Kyoya was left completely on the defensive, but he couldn't actually defend himself properly. He simply couldn't keep up.

That's strange, Natsuki thought. Yuichi was moving fast, but not so fast she couldn't follow him.

Mutsuko must have read her mind, because these were the next words out of her mouth:

"The thing is that whether you're fighting a vampire or an anthromorph, they still don't think or react any faster than a human. That's why he can't deal with Yu's disappearing moves. In martial arts, disappearing moves are moves that run contrary to what your opponent assumes you'll do. See, what we perceive as 'vision' is an amalgamation of what the brain assumes will happen, and what's really happening. The brain runs various simulations based on stimuli about what's going to happen next, and presents the results as if you really saw it... Well, that explanation might not make sense to you, but I'll explain more about how the brain works later."

"What did you *do* to Sakaki?" What could turn a human into something like that? Natsuki couldn't even imagine.

"I didn't do anything to him! He's the one who pushed himself that hard," Mutsuko responded.

"Why did you do this to Sakaki?" Natsuki stared at the video of Yuichi playing

out on the wall. The degree of violence he was inflicting on a fellow human could easily be called “excessive.” For what reason had Mutsuko worked to train Yuichi to this level? That was what she didn’t understand.

“Does a boy need a reason to want to become strong?” The innocence in Mutsuko’s smile sent a chill down Natsuki’s spine.

Was it possible, she wondered, that maybe she really didn’t have any reason? That he’d just wanted to become the strongest man in the world?

Natsuki stared off into space as the thought drifted through her mind. Meanwhile, after checking something on her tablet, Mutsuko stood up.

“Takeuchi, I need to take care of something. Could you wait here?”

“Okay... but are you sure we shouldn’t do something about Sakaki?”

“I think Noro’s the one who’ll do something!” With that carefree line, Mutsuko left the restaurant behind.

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The heart was his weak spot.

Remembering that, Yuichi struck Kyoya in the back just behind his heart.

Sufficient concussion to the heart would cause ventricular fibrillation. Most people wouldn’t know just when you needed to strike to cause it, but Mutsuko’s teachings had made it possible for him.

Kyoya’s heart stopped. Then, it started again.

Stubborn.

It was clear, then, that a stake through the heart was the only reliable way. He pulled another white magnolia stake from his pocket. It was only the size of a pencil. Possibly not sturdy enough to pierce through to the heart.

But if he tried it and it didn’t work, he could dig in through his side and crush the heart in his hand. And if that didn’t work, he’d just rip him apart until he couldn’t regenerate anymore.

Yuichi wrapped his fingers around the stake. He was about to strike it into Kyoya’s heart with his fist, when...

“Sakaki!” The voice interrupted him.

“Sakaki, that’s enough! You’ve done enough!” Aiko’s voice was calling out to him, desperately.

From the corner of his eye, he could see the girl staggering to her feet.

Her uniform was in shreds. Her red eyes had returned to their normal color, and the wings on her back were gone.

She slowly walked up to him. “This is my problem! If anyone’s going to finish him, let it be me! So... enough! Please, stop it, Sakaki!” Aiko threw her arms around him, weeping.

“Noro...” Aiko’s touch brought Yuichi back to his senses. She was looking up at him with tears in her eyes.

“Love Interest.” The sight of her label going back to normal filled Yuichi’s heart with joy.

He laughed. “Wow. You are acting pretty much like a love interest right now...”

Aiko drew away, perhaps embarrassed over how she’d thrown her arms around Yuichi.

“Noro... Thank you. You saved me.”

In front of Yuichi lay Kyoya, his body covered in blood. He lacked the power to maintain his bestial form, so he was back in his human one. But even then, he was barely recognizable as human.

His arms and legs were bent at unusual angles. His bones were sticking out; there were gouges taken out of his flesh. His regeneration had slowed. It seemed the power couldn’t run forever.

“I-I’ll do it!” Aiko snatched the stake from Yuichi and brandished it over Kyoya.

“Don’t!” Yuichi shouted.

“But...” Aiko began.

“It’s okay now... I think.” Yuichi drew closer to Kyoya. “Right?”

“Eek!” Kyoya curled up, making a pathetic sound.

“Stop making trouble for your family, and give the world conquest stuff a rest,” Yuichi said. “Okay?”

Kyoya mustered up the last of his strength to nod hastily.

His spirit was completely broken. In Yuichi’s experience, once a person had been reduced to this, they never crossed him again.

“See? It’s okay,” Yuichi began to say. Then he realized the world was going dark around him.

As his knees buckled beneath him, he put a hand on the wall. Then from there, he slowly slid to the floor.

“Sakaki!” Aiko’s scream was the last thing Yuichi heard before he lost consciousness.

*****

Eriko watched the end of it from the roof of the old school building.

Vampires had the ability to share sensations with the people whose blood they drank. It was through this power that Eriko had perceived everything that happened to Kyoya.

“What on earth...” She put a filter over the sensation, so that while she could perceive the presence of pain, she didn’t have to feel it firsthand. But that alone was enough to make her quiver in fear.

Eriko had never been in a real fight, but it was easy for her to tell that Kyoya was up against some kind of monster. There was beauty in the precise, efficient way he dismantled his enemy.

This was not someone she wanted to have against her, she realized.

Eriko decided that it was time.

The result of her experiment was clear: Drinking too much blood had made it impossible for Kyoya to walk in the sun, and had begun making him more beast-like.

The beast forms... They were terribly ugly. Unpalatable to Eriko’s sense of aesthetics.

Kyoya's body had continued to transform. Most recently, his fangs had remained extended, and he had grown hairier. In other words, if she drank too much blood, she would eventually turn out the same way.

What Eriko had been seeking was eternal beauty; the balance that would keep her from aging without turning her into a beast. But after seeing Aiko, she began to wonder if there was another way.

Aiko...

She had been so beautiful.

Could that have been the legendary form written about in Eriko's notebook? She had thought it didn't really exist, but after what she had seen, she had no choice but to believe.

"Perhaps that rumor was true..." she murmured.

Eriko had heard a rumor — which now seemed extremely plausible — that Aiko was not truly linked to the Noro household by blood. In other words, both Kyoya and Aiko were vampires, but of different species.

Could she, Eriko, undergo a similar transformation? If it were a question of bloodline, did she have any of that blood within her? She would have to experiment with Aiko next. What did it take to achieve that form? Aiko was a simple girl, she thought. It would be easy to string her along. And then...

"Good evening. Can we talk?"

Torn out of her thoughts by the new voice, Eriko turned.

There was a girl standing alone in the moonlight on the roof of the old school building.

Mutsuko Sakaki. The monster's older sister.

"What are you doing here?" Eriko asked in her most elegant tone.

"I set up security cameras all over the school, 'cause you never know where an enemy might come from!" Mutsuko declared. "Of course, I never expected to see one fly down onto the roof..."

Eriko quietly looked around her. She couldn't see anything that looked like a

security camera.

“Well, they’re not so easy to spot. I can’t have people finding them, after all!”

“I see. So, what did you want to talk about?” Eriko asked.

“How much do you know? How much did you have to do with what happened?” Mutsuko demanded.

“You really think I’ll tell you?”

“Aw, you won’t? I was hoping you’d be the chatty type... I mean, the mastermind always comes around in the last act to spill the whole scheme and tell the heroes everything! Even stuff they didn’t ask for!”

“Oh? You think I’m a mastermind? Yet you willingly stepped into my presence, thinking you’d be safe?” Eriko asked.

“Nah, I’m not too worried about that!”

Eriko narrowed her eyes cautiously. This was that monster’s sister she was dealing with, after all... There might indeed be more to her.

“Well, I guess it’s okay if you won’t tell me,” Mutsuko said. “But the real problem is the people you drank blood from. I don’t think we have to worry about Noro’s brother doing it anymore, but... How about it? Can we get you to lay off, too?”

“And why exactly should I do what you tell me?” Eriko asked.

“I figured you’d say something like that. I’ve got a pretty short fuse, so once negotiations break down, I go right to force.”

She was close. The distance between Eriko and Mutsuko had closed without her realizing it.

Eriko had never even seen her move. It wasn’t as if she had come rushing up to her. It just seemed as though the next thing she knew, Mutsuko was there in front of her.

“There!” With a grunt, Mutsuko swung both arms, as though to hug herself.

Shing! There was the sound of metal unsheathing as blades sprung forth from both of Mutsuko’s arms. They tore a cut across Eriko’s chest.

“Is this what they call an ‘a-ha experience’?” Mutsuko asked casually.

Eriko didn’t realize that the reason she hadn’t noticed Mutsuko’s approach was that she had only slid her feet along without letting her upper body sway at all.

Eriko jumped back.

The wound was extremely shallow, but very slow to regenerate.

The blades had ripped through Mutsuko’s sleeves at the elbow and extended all the way to her shoulders with a dull glint.

“I see. The silver coating was super effective, huh?” Mutsuko crossed her blade-coated arms, nodding as if in understanding.

Eriko decided she had to get out of there. This woman was too unpredictable to remain in the presence of.

She unfurled her bat wings — she usually tried not to use them in front of others, but she didn’t have many options now. “This is nonsense. I don’t have to hang around with you people.” She spread her wings and gave them a flap, which lifted her lightly into the air.

Mutsuko had no way of reaching her there, Eriko realized, and looked down at the girl in triumph.

“Saber off!” Mutsuko uncrossed her arms forcefully, launching the blades outward.

The blades spun through the air and caught a corner of Eriko’s wings.

Eriko didn’t lose balance and fall, but she also couldn’t make any more progress. She only barely managed to hold her position and remain in place.

“Aww! Well, prototypes usually have issues with precision...” Mutsuko pouted.

But Eriko felt sure that it wasn’t over yet. She couldn’t let her guard down; she had to get out of there as soon as possible.

Eriko flapped her wings again and resumed her ascent. She felt relieved as she seemed, this time, to be safe. But before she could leave the school behind, Mutsuko turned back around.

She looked Eriko straight in the eye, and stretched out her right arm. Her fingers took the shape of a gun.

“Bang!” Mutsuko said.

Eriko just assumed she was just being a sore loser... and an instant later, there was a hole in her stomach.

*****

“That one was pretty imprecise, too... Or was that your fault, Ibaraki?” Mutsuko asked.

“Hey, look... don’t blame this on me, okay? You told me the aiming was automatic.” Ibaraki’s voice could be heard over Mutsuko’s tablet.

Mutsuko had told Ibaraki that the body detection software would lock on to her heart automatically. All he had to do was pull the trigger when she told him to.

Mutsuko looked up at the sky. Eriko was falling.

“Okay, fire two! This time, aim for the heart!” Mutsuko cried.

“Can’t,” Ibaraki answered.

“Why not? Theoretically it should have three shots to a charge!”

“It shot out some of these big things... Condensers, I think? Like, really far.”

“Huh? Oh, come on!”

“Hey, don’t blame me... You’re the one who built it,” Ibaraki said.

Mutsuko had prepared an anti-vampire trump card: her very own hand-made railgun.

The only problem was, it was so big that it had to be hauled around like artillery. That was where Ibaraki’s brute strength came in handy.

First, they had broken down the railgun and had Natsuki’s servant Sakiyama drive it to a building near the school. Then Ibaraki had used his oni strength to carry the parts up to the roof. Since oni weren’t good with modern technology, Sakiyama had been the one to assemble it.

Either of them could handle the aiming, but since it could involve killing, they decided that Ibaraki should do it.

“By the way, couldn’t we have just used a sniper rifle instead of something like this?” Ibaraki asked.

“Huh? I thought you said you weren’t good with guns!” Mutsuko said.

Everything on Mutsuko's railgun, including the targeting, was automatic, so even Ibaraki could use it.

"So you knew from the start that I'd be the one firing it, huh?" Ibaraki asked.

"Well, it's also illegal to carry rifles in Japan!" Mutsuko proclaimed. "Railguns aren't covered by the Swords and Firearms Control Law!"

"Huh? No, hang on, back up... am I the only one who sees a fundamental problem with this?"

"Oh, never mind! If it can't be used, it can't be used, so just take it down, okay?" Mutsuko commanded.

"...What a slave driver... Now I know how Yuichi feels..." Ibaraki grumbled, but he cut off contact to do — she assumed — as he was told.

Eriko fell back to the roof. Vampire that she was, though, she could survive even a bullet to the gut and a fall like that.

"Well, what now? I'm not sure what I have on hand will be enough to finish you off..." Mutsuko was genuinely at a loss for what to do next. Fortunately, it was just then that the door to the roof opened.

"Why don't you let me handle the rest?" A large man in a white coat stepped onto the roof.

"And who might you be?" Mutsuko asked.

"I'm Aiko Noro's father, Kazuya Noro. I'm sorry for the trouble my relatives have been causing you..."

"Oh, gosh! You've done such a great job raising Noro, though! Okay, well, if you want to take care of the situation, I have no issue with leaving it to you."

"I'm glad you feel that way." Kazuya turned back and gave a signal. A number of men appeared and carried Eriko off.

"We'll deal with Kyoya in the same way," Kazuya said.

"Did Noro call you by chance, sir?" Mutsuko asked.

"Yes. Aiko called and told me about it."

"I'm not sure if I should be asking this, but... if we had just let you handle it

from the start... would it still have gotten resolved?” Mutsuko asked.

“No... embarrassing as it is to admit, our hands were tied by a certain agreement. We can’t do anything to stop a vampire that has unleashed its true nature. So what you’ve done has been a great help.”

“Oh, I’m glad to hear that. Oh, also! You guys run a hospital, right? Could you take Yu there? I think he’s in pretty bad shape right now.”

Not only had he transcended his limitations with the furukami, he’d further transcended those limitations to force himself to move again. The aftereffects he suffered would be worse than even the standard furukami’s.

“I’ll handle everything. They don’t call me a super doctor for nothing!” Kazuya declared.

And so, he took Yuichi into his care for treatment.

Epilogue 1: Let's Finally Pick Where to Go For Our Summer Training Camp

Six days had passed.

After losing consciousness, Yuichi had been taken to Noro General Hospital and had spent most of the time after that asleep. Naturally, he was really badly off this time. He wouldn't be able to move for a while, so he had been on an IV drip. By now, though, he was nearly recovered, and he was passing the time on the bed in the small room with little to do.

He was so bored, he thought, he might even welcome Ibaraki's company.

Today, the school would be holding the closing ceremony for their first term.

The fact that they were still holding it suggested that no one had noticed what had happened at the school. Out of sheer boredom, Yuichi had spent most of his time reading the news on his phone. There was no mention of the recent incident, though there were some rumors about giant bats and wolf-people that seemed like they might be vaguely related. It was just the kind of thing people spread around the internet for fun, though, with no actual proof.

"Hello!" A cheerful voice greeted Yuichi from the door to his room.

It was Tomomi Hamasaki, "Fake." She was wearing her glasses, with her hair down to her shoulders rather than in buns. She was in her school uniform, too — in other words, it was the Tomomi he saw in class every day. It suggested that she was dropping by on the way back from school.

Yuichi was surprised to see her. He didn't think they were close enough for her to want to visit him in the hospital.

"Wow, that's a real 'what the heck are you doing here?!' expression," Tomomi commented.

"That's not what I was thinking," Yuichi said. "I just found it unusual. Is school over?"

“Yeah. I came here straight from the closing ceremony.” Tomomi sat down in a chair next to the bed. “I’m here to see you less as a classmate and more as a regular. You know, keep you quiet, and stuff.”

“I won’t tell anyone, and I won’t ask any more about your situation, so don’t worry,” Yuichi said earnestly. He genuinely didn’t want to know, anyway, and prying into her story might get him mixed up in another complicated mess.

Tomomi’s mouth popped open in shock. “Oh, come on! Don’t you want to know who Nihao the China is, or why we weren’t disturbed by those anthromorphs in the store?”

“I thought you came here to keep me quiet!” Yuichi sighed. Apparently she had really been hoping to tell him. “Hearing about things I don’t need to know tends to end up making trouble for me. So I really don’t want to know.”

“Huh? Really? You know enough by now that I could probably tell you everything... I mean, I assumed that’s what *you’d* say, so I thought up a whole spiel on the way here!”

“Not my problem,” Yuichi said.

“What? I didn’t know you were such a jerk, Sakaki! Okay, now I’m gonna tell you whether you like it or not! I’ll whisper my true identity into your ear!” Fuming, Tomomi leaned over the bed, pressing close to Yuichi.

“You stubborn idiot! I told you, I don’t want to know!” Yuichi pushed back against her.

“Hey! What are you doing?!” An enraged cry sounded out behind them. Yuichi and Tomomi turned to face it.

It was Aiko, holding a bouquet of flowers. She was also in her school uniform, apparently having come right from school as well.

“Oh, well, ahaha...” Tomomi sat down on the bed, laughing awkwardly. “O-Okay, I’m going now! We’ll be waiting for you at the restaurant!”

With that, she scurried past Aiko and left.

“Sakaki... well, I know you wouldn’t get involved in any funny business, but...” Aiko sighed.

“Hamasaki said she came to keep me quiet, but then tried to tell me all her secrets by force,” Yuichi said.

Aiko frowned. “Yeah, I don’t get it.”

“Neither do I! Did you know she was like that?”

“She’s a lot of fun to be around,” Aiko said. “She’s just a little thoughtless and hyperactive sometimes. I doubt she’ll do that to you once you’re out of the hospital.”

“I’ll be feeling better soon,” Yuichi assured her. “Don’t worry.”

Aiko walked up to Yuichi and sat down. The hospital room was very small, which meant Aiko was close enough for him to feel a little self-conscious.

“Um... I’m really sorry about all the trouble my brother caused...” Aiko bowed her head, expression humble.

“Don’t worry. I’m not bothered. How’s he doing, anyway?” Yuichi had heard Kyoya wasn’t dead, and that his vampiric regeneration was hard at work, so that was a load off of his mind.

“They locked him in the dungeon,” Aiko said.

“The dungeon? You guys have one of those at home?”

“I didn’t know either, but apparently, yeah. He’s doing some time there. The madness seems to have ended, though, so I think he might be fine now.”

Kyoya had lost nearly all of his powers. Thanks to that, the people he had enslaved were back to normal.

“Dad was really surprised by how fast you healed.” Aiko changed the subject, apparently not wanting to talk about her brother.

Yuichi wasn’t inclined to ask any more about him, either. “Well, I did sleep for six days straight.” He wasn’t completely recovered yet, but it was enough that he could resume his daily life, at least.

“Yoriko threw a fit, too,” Aiko added.

“Yori came?” Yuichi had been asleep and thus, hadn’t been aware of it.

“Every single day,” Aiko told him. “She kept mumbling about killing whoever

did this. It was a little scary.”

“Yori’s pretty indiscriminate, yeah...” Maybe he should tell her to chill out about it.

“Your mother only came by once, I think,” Aiko added.

“That sounds about right for her.”

Yuichi’s mother didn’t seem to worry about him very much. Perhaps it was because he had been in the hospital so many times, she knew how tough he was by now.

“So summer break arrived while I was in the hospital, huh?” Yuichi asked. He’d been asleep, and the next thing he knew, it was summer vacation. It felt a bit like he had missed out on something.

“I’m glad you didn’t miss out on summer vacation,” Aiko said. “I hear you’re being released tomorrow.”

“Speaking of which, are Orihara and the others okay?” Yuichi asked.

“Yeah, apparently the charm disappeared right away,” Aiko said.

Fortunately (in a sense), the girls who had been charmed and imprisoned in the school didn’t remember what had happened.

There was a moment’s silence, and Aiko suddenly averted her eyes, as if suddenly remembering something. “Um... I got... pretty weird back there, huh? I told you that even though I’m a vampire, I’m not so different from a human... but I guess I’m not normal at all...” she said hesitantly. “It was like my mind went blank, but a part of me was so calm... the use of the power came to me so naturally... and it was telling me to kill my brother...” she continued, on the verge of tears.

“It was beautiful,” Yuichi said. Yuichi wondered how he should comfort her. After deciding that his first priority was to keep from hurting her, those were the words that he chose.

“Huh?” Aiko lifted her head and looked at him in utter confusion as color filled her cheeks.

“I-I mean, your wings,” Yuichi said. “The way they glittered. It was beautiful

and incredible. Yeah.”

“Really? I d-don’t really remember much about it...”

“It surprised me a little,” Yuichi said, hoping to assuage her concerns. “But it’s not that big a deal, I don’t think.”

“R-Really?” Aiko sounded genuinely relieved.

As the conversation fell silent, Yuichi thought back on what had happened. From what he could see, Aiko’s potential far outstripped Kyoya’s. The strongest person in that room on that day had been Aiko.

The world’s strongest little sister, huh?

Yuichi felt like maybe he knew where Kyoya’s resentment had come from. Perhaps he had caught a glimpse of her power once before.

Now that Aiko was feeling better, her manner turned teasing. “Hey, you were really mad then, weren’t you? Because you thought he might kill me.”

“Well...” Yuichi really had been. He’d been so enraged, he hadn’t been able to stop himself. If Aiko hadn’t stepped in, he probably would have killed Kyoya. “It just bothered me to see a brother try to hurt his little sister.” He averted his eyes from hers.

“What the heck?” Aiko puffed out her cheek in dissatisfaction.

“Well, it’s okay,” she continued after a moment. “You kind of have an obsession with little sisters.”

“Huh? What makes you say that?” Yuichi looked back at Aiko, her wording unexpected and slightly startling.

Aiko smiled. “Thanks for stopping my brother.”

Yuichi averted his eyes again, shyly. “Oh, b-by the way. You sucked my blood, Noro. Will I be okay?” He was quick to change the subject.

“Huh? You don’t think...” Aiko asked in concern.

“No, I’m not having any symptoms, as far as I know,” Yuichi said. “I was just wondering if I might become a vampire too, or something like that.”

“I don’t know... b-but if it happens, I’ll take responsibility!”

“I don’t think that’s something you take responsibility for, Noro. ...I know. Why don’t we test to see if I’m enslaved?”

“What do you mean?” Aiko tilted her head.

“You know. If I’m your thrall, I have to do what you tell me, right? So order me to do something totally unreasonable. If I can refuse you, I’m fine. Probably.”

After a moment’s thought, Aiko made up her mind, and began to give an order. “O-Okay. Something unreasonable... th-then why don’t you give me a ki__”

“Is this flirting? Are you flirting?!” Before Aiko could finish, Mutsuko barged into the hospital room. “Hey, why do they even call it flirting, anyhow?”

“W-We weren’t flirting!” Aiko responded in irritation.

Kanako, Natsuki, and Yoriko filed in behind Mutsuko.

“Hey, that’s too many people. You can visit one at a time!” Aiko protested.

The small room suddenly felt much, much smaller.

“Huh? But today’s the day we’re supposed to choose our training camp location! You couldn’t come, so we came to you!” Mutsuko declared.

“You want to run the club from here?” Yuichi asked tiredly. Having Yoriko there, on top of the usual members, tilted the gender balance even further to the female side.

“Then let’s decide where to go for summer training camp! Vacation starts tomorrow, so we need to start preparations today!” Mutsuko cried.

“I’m still in recovery. Can’t you tell?” Yuichi complained.

“I see. Then we’ll let you choose! Then there’s no issue, right? Just pick the option that best jives with how you feel! Oh, and no ‘just stay at school,’ got that?”

Yuichi thought back on the candidates they had named previously before. A summer house by the sea, a junkyard, the isekai elevator, a foreign country, the “Unmarked Land,” and the Mayoiga. “Okay. By process of elimination, it’s gotta be the summer house!” There was nothing else to choose.

“Junkyard...” “Isekai...” Natsuki and Kanako murmured dejectedly.

“I’m not going to either of those!” Yuichi yelled at the despondent pair.

“Big Brother, I’ll be going, too,” Yoriko said.

“Huh? Why are you going, Yori?” Yuichi turned to his little sister. She sounded like she meant it.

“Because it’s not a school thing, right? So I can come!” In the end, Mutsuko had never bothered to ask the school for permission, so it was going to be more a group outing than a sanctioned club activity.

“Then Noro’s family’s summer house it is!” Mutsuko proclaimed.

And thus, Yuichi’s summer vacation began.

Epilogue 2: A Very Suspicious Person

It was late at night. Takashi Jonouchi was wandering the city.

He couldn't forget.

He had been wandering this way ever since Natsuki Takeuchi had blown him off just before finals.

During his wandering, he had met a vampire named Eriko Kamiya. She had changed his life. He'd become a vampire, gained the ability to take beast form... and then the next thing he knew, it was all gone.

Anthromorphs were vampires' retainers, and that power was gifted to them by their vampiric master. Takeshi assumed that Eriko had been killed; now, he had lost that power.

He should have left it all behind and returned to his daily life... and yet, he continued to wander the city at night.

Takashi couldn't forget the ecstasy that had enveloped him when he'd felt the beast's power coursing through his veins. Compared to the might of the beast, his human body felt so frail.

He felt exposed; naked.

And so Takashi continued wandering.

Perhaps, he hoped — a fleeting hope — that another vampire would find him and restore that power to him.

Perhaps it was in vain.

Perhaps it was all futile.

How long had he been doing this, now?

"Why the long face? It's sad to see a proud anthromorph reduced to this."

Anthromorph? Takashi looked up as he heard the word.

At some point he had come out in a suburb. An expensive car was stopped in

the road beside him. A voice addressed him from the back seat.

“Yuri Konishi...” he murmured.

She was a girl his age; they had met several times in their parents’ society parties.

She had blonde hair done up in an intricate style, and an imperious gaze. She was the type of girl you never forgot once you met her once.

“What’s an anthromorph?” he asked her.

“If you want to play dumb, you’ve picked the wrong person,” she said. “We’re the ones who had to clean up after you, after all. Attacking a Chinese restaurant... what a moronic thing to do.”

Natsuki Takeuchi... He remembered. Natsuki Takeuchi had been in that Chinese restaurant for some reason. And before he could figure out what was going on, she had torn his body to ribbons.

He had lost his power immediately afterward; the vampire had probably been defeated by one of Natsuki’s allies.

Yuri got out of her car. “Come with me. I shall teach you the true power of the anthromorph.” She offered Takashi her hand.

“What are you talking about? I thought an anthromorph had no power without a vampire... Wait, do you have a vampiric master, too?” Takashi’s eyes glittered with hope at the thought.

“What nonsense are you spouting? The vampires and the anthromorphs have no direct connection. Watch. I have never had my blood drained by a vampire, yet I can do this freely!” Yuri pointed to her head proudly.

Takashi’s eyes opened wide. She had cat ears.

“You’ve been taken in by the vampires’ folklore, which means we’ll have to deprogram you,” she told him. “But I think we can handle that well enough. Consider yourself in good hands.”

“...What will happen if I go with you?” he asked slowly.

“The Noro household has lost a great deal of influence due to their breaking an

important agreement recently. This is our chance to liberate ourselves from the vampires' ridiculous insistence that they're our masters! To make this possible, we need every anthromorph we can get. Those who have transformed before will be especially important. Now, come with me!"

Yuri had been holding her hand out to him all this time. Takashi now felt no hesitation about taking it.

If it meant regaining the power of the anthromorph, he didn't care who it came from. To Takeshi, who had convinced himself of that, taking her hand was the easiest thing in the world.

Afterword

Hello.

I've been pulling all-nighters to meet the volume 2 deadline. So while I have my reservations, at least I can relax knowing it worked out.

Apparently, it was recently discovered that sleep is a way for the brain to expel waste. In other words, they proved what we already knew, that it's not good to go without sleep. Who was it who insisted that no one had ever died from lack of sleep? But even if you don't die, it can really cause your mind to wander, right? Therefore, I want to sleep. Let me sleep!

This is an old story. Once, there was a martial artist who used to suffer sleep paralysis.

He was able to break out of it through his own power — I don't know how — but then he heard a voice say to him, "Don't think this is over!"

I tell that story to make people laugh, but about half of the people I tell it to find it scary.

That story was on my mind because I was recently allowed to meet someone related to that martial artist. I was able to ask him what happened after the sleep paralysis incident.

"Nothing in particular," he told me. So maybe it was just a case of sour grapes.

As for why I was meeting a martial artist, it's because of a lack of material.

A long time ago, I used to dabble in the martial arts. (Um, I'm not good at all, so please don't try to challenge me!) So the ones I met were my senpais, or masters, or partners of the time.

But when I asked them, "You taught me this move, didn't you?" they would say "Wait, did I?" It was very sad, and I was left no better off than before.

Lately, I've been so sluggish, and it's going to make me fat. I really need to do something about that.

Now for the apologies.

To my editor, I’m sorry for all the trouble I’ve caused you.

To my illustrator, An2A, I’m pretty sure the only reason the first volume sold was because of your illustrations. Thank you for providing even more wonderful illustrations.

And thank you to everyone else who helped. It was hard going, but I managed to write it all out. I also hope to write more, so please enjoy that when it comes out.

In the next volume, Yuichi was going to refuse to go on the training camp. But then I got people asking me if the training camp would involve swimsuits on the beach. So it might still become that kind of story, or it might not.

Tsuyoshi Fujitaka

Please hold off on opinions and thoughts... just send fan letters to...

151-0052 3-15-8 Yoyogi, Shibuya Ward, Tokyo Hobby Japan, Inc. HJ Bunko Editorial Department Tsuyoshi Fujitaka/An2A

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My Big Sister Lives in a Fantasy World: The Half-Baked Vampire vs. The Strongest Little Sister?!

by Tsuyoshi Fujitaka

Translated by Elizabeth Ellis Edited by Emily Sorensen

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